

# The Architect's Role in Reshaping Public Housing Policy

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## INTRODUCTION

The problems that have historically plagued public housing programs and hampered their implementation have been the focus of countless inquiries by scholars, professionals, government agencies, housing advocates, and concerned citizens. These studies have contributed variously to the understanding that the failure of the state and the federal government to meet even the most fundamental need for shelter of the nations poor is linked to deeply rooted inequalities of class, race, and gender. Minorities, female-headed households, and the homeless face significantly more severe housing problems than any other segment of our population. Differentiating among these groups and the type of problems that each face is essential to developing effective strategies to meet their housing needs (Marcuse, 1989:68).

Public housing policy past and present however has addressed only the resultant crisis and has systematically turned a blind eye toward the socio-economic and political environment in which the problems have been cultivated. Criteria for public (housing) program development is rarely defined in terms of individual exigency, proceeding usually from a preconceived agenda of basic service provision, and a paternalistic predisposition of protectionism towards a "helpless", subordinate population. The result has been the proliferation of programs which tend to hold individuals in a state of dependency in forbidding, ill-favored "projects" that are the objects of community scorn and contempt.

Yet, in recent years, from an increasing number of the most profoundly beleaguered housing communities in the country have emerged creative and determined individuals who have proposed initiatives for the responsive and comprehensive redevelopment of their own communities. This paper addresses the role of the architect in assisting residents in developing community based planning programs that have potential for providing a suitable model for the redefinition and restructuring of public housing and public housing policy.

## BACKGROUND: PUBLIC HOUSING POLICY IN THE U.S.

The government policy of providing housing and housing

assistance to poor people has only developed in the last few decades. Various building and assistance programs have evolved as a response to an increasing deficit in the stock of affordable housing, and a perceived need for government intervention.

In the thirties and forties when most of the programs were initiated, they were largely economy-driven. Federal moneys were spent on the development of affordable housing to stimulate growth. The Home Loan Bank System, Federal Housing Administration, the Veterans Administration, and the Federal National Mortgage Association were established to revive a stagnating building industry and the private mortgage market (Abrams, 1969:36-37). It was assumed that the private sector would naturally respond to the shortage of low-income housing with building and redevelopment initiatives of their own. When private enterprise failed to produce the necessary affordable housing stock, the federal government developed incentive programs for developers that included low-interest and guaranteed loans, land grants and tax breaks (Pozdena, 1988:147; Achtenberg and Marcuse, 1986:5).

It was through an act of legislation that the first public housing program came into existence in the form of the **Housing Act of 1937**. Its purpose was to stimulate a depressed economy by increasing housing construction, reducing unemployment, and preparing former slum properties for redevelopment. It met with vigorous and strategic opposition from such organizations as The National Association of Real Estate Boards, the U.S. Savings and Loan League, and the U.S. Mortgage Bankers Association, whose powerful lobbies virtually mandated that public housing not compete with housing in the private market (Pit and van Vliet, 1988, 206). The austere image which is the identification mark of most public housing projects today bears witness to the success of this campaign.

The Act also contained provisions for counties or municipalities to establish local housing authorities that could purchase and manage housing properties with tax free bond money. (See Marcuse, 327-376 in van Vliet, 1990). Largely appointed by local governments, these authorities decided whether and where to build public housing projects in their

cities. Organized pressure from constituents all but guaranteed that public housing would not be built in affluent areas, and condemned such projects that did get built to remote, undesirable, and even dangerous localities.

As well-intended as some aspects of the early programs may have been, they were often undercut by misdirected or countervailing policy. The Truman administration **Housing Act of 1949** fell far short of its goal to provide "a decent home and suitable living environment for every American family". Attempting to demonstrate its renewed commitment to urban redevelopment and to the provision of public housing, the administration promised 810,000 units over a six year period (Lord, cited in Pit & van Vliet, 1988, 206). It was twenty years, however, before that goal was achieved (ibid). The **Housing Act of 1954** created by the Eisenhower administration placed greater emphasis than ever before on less federal involvement. It encouraged private initiatives and required that local governments provide a workable plan for community development in order to access federal funds. A provision requiring that units demolished by urban renewal (slum clearance) be replaced one for one was never adhered to.

The Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), was created with the **Housing Act of 1965**. Programs for home ownership and rental housing assistance created by HUD (Act of 1968) were, from their very beginnings, plagued with scandal and corruption and subsequently suspended in 1973. The **Housing and Community Development Act of 1974** (Nixon administration) more clearly reflected the interests of the private sector than any public housing policy since the 1950's, and introduced subsidy programs which are still in effect today. (See Marcuse, 327-376 in van Vliet, 1990, for more discussion on housing acts)

Efforts of the Reagan and Bush administrations to discourage the development and redevelopment of public housing gave rise to various home ownership programs such as HOPE I, II, VI, etc., (Home Ownership and Opportunities for People Everywhere) whereby a select few families who qualified could purchase an affordable dwelling. Policy under these administrations and the resultant sharp cutbacks in federal expenditures for construction were packaged and sold to voters as the new means by which poor people could gain independence and sample the American dream. Operating under the same rubric of self-determination for the residents of public housing, the current rhetoric of public housing policy stipulates resident participation in the management and planning of their communities. (See Vision/Reality, Community Partnership Strategy).

### ALLEN PARKWAY VILLAGE

Allen Parkway Village is the largest public housing complex in Houston, Texas. Designed in the early 1940's by architects McKie and Kamrath, it can accommodate 1,000 families. Following the principles of the Zeilenbau model of site planning for the optimization of natural light and ventilation, it is an excellent example of climate responsive, sustainable design.

Originally intended to house white families exclusively, it did so until 1964 when by order of the Civil Rights Amendment the project was finally integrated. It has achieved national significance on the National Register of Historic Places along with adjacent Freedmen's Town, Houston's oldest African American neighborhood. Occupying a prime piece of real estate between downtown Houston and the city's most affluent residential neighborhood, Allen Parkway Village has been threatened with demolition by the Housing Authority of the City of Houston (HACH) for eighteen years.

Though Houston has one of the highest rates in the nation of physically deficient housing among poor homeowners, and a waiting list of more than 6,000 people in need of housing, the authorities have systematically neglected and mismanaged Allen Parkway Village which constitutes nearly one quarter of the public housing stock in the entire city. (Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, Nov. 1992). It is through the heroic efforts of the residents, of whom only 60 now remain (due to a massive expulsion campaign by HACH) that this significant example of modern architectural design, community planning, and New Deal Era social development is still standing. (See Fox).

### THE ARCHITECT'S ROLE

Our involvement with Allen Parkway Village began when the residents' proposal for their community redevelopment won favor with Secretary of Housing and Urban Development, Henry Cisneros. On the merit of that proposal the secretary nominally awarded the residents a substantial planning grant and the status of "equal partner" with HUD and the Housing Authority of the City of Houston in the development of their Community Campus Concept, a visionary plan of rehabilitation proposed by the residents and their consultants, which corresponded with the forward-looking agenda of the new federal programs. In this plan they formulated nine principles which provide for the development of on site social, educational and health care programs, medical services, developmental child care, job training, skills development and self-management within a socioeconomically, generationally, and ethnically diverse community.

Although the residents' plan was entirely consistent with the expectations of community partnership policy and fully (publicly) endorsed by the Secretary, the prospects of resident management and preservation of public housing on valuable property proved unpalatable to the authorities. As the residents of Allen Parkway Village became increasingly frustrated in their struggle to maintain a voice in the planning negotiations, our role as their pro bono architectural advisors expanded to include advocating their cause, researching policy and procedure, and lobbying in support of their model sustainable community concept. Where existing public housing policy had failed, i.e. in responding to the real needs of program recipients and ultimately providing a way out of dependency, the Community Campus plan was determined to succeed. Design and technical consultation yielded to writing

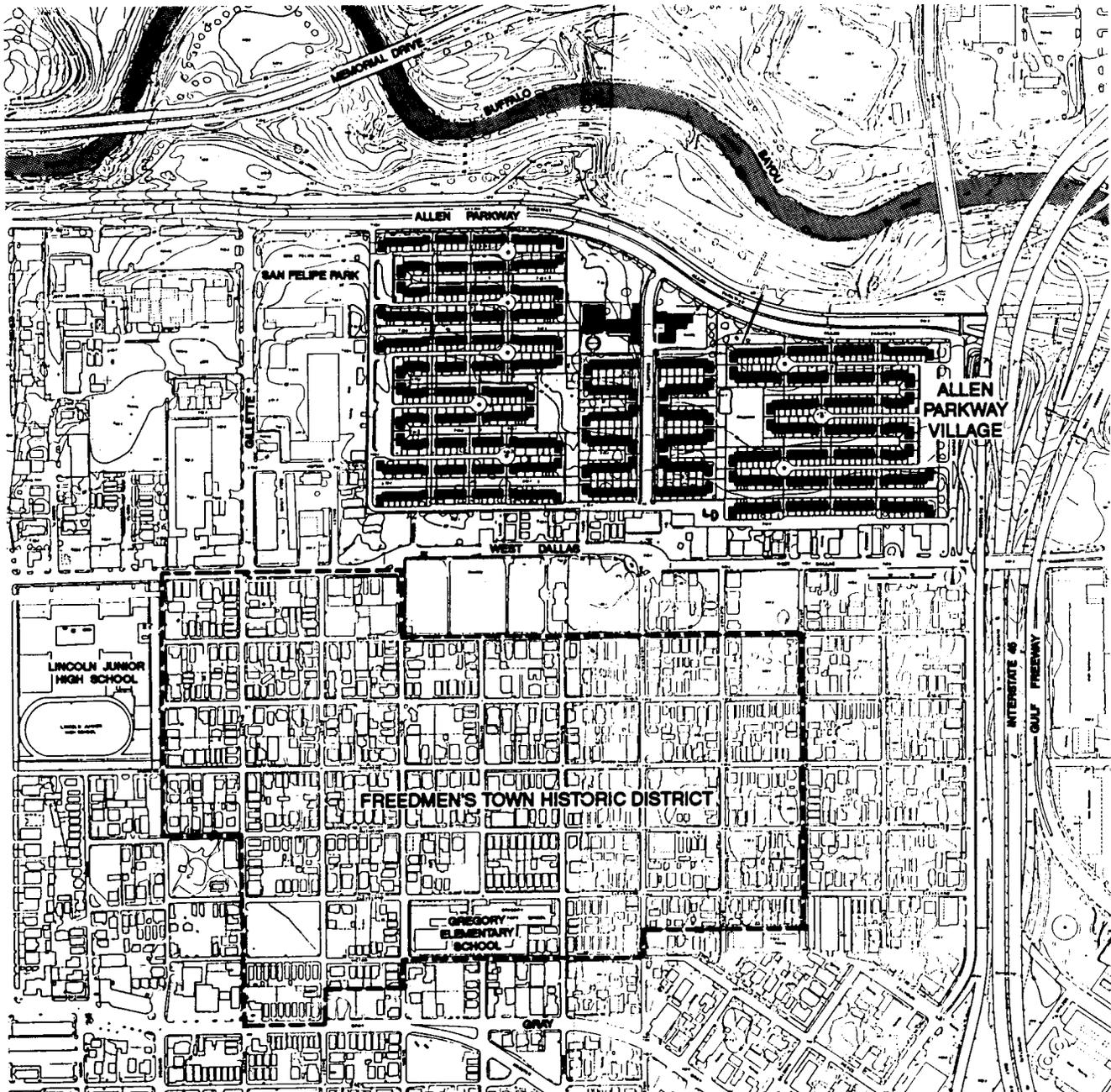


Figure 1. Location map showing Allen Parkway Village and its proximity to Freedmen's Town Historic District and Buffalo Bayou.

letters, attending press conferences, meeting with public servants, and rallying public support for the residents' plan.

The support we offered included maintaining records of meetings and correspondence involving the residents; maintaining a "paper trail" whereby we could call public attention to oversights and inconsistencies, and ensure accountability; and documenting the residents' planning process and the products of their planning efforts. In collaboration with sociologist Dana Cuff of UCLA Graduate School of Architecture and Urban Planning we assisted the residents in disproving the viability of the housing authority's tenant relocation plan which would have increased their vulnerability to crime, threatened their safety, and fenced them into a

remote corner of the complex away from facilities and services they require on a daily basis. Using Oscar Newman's defensible space strategies we supported a relocation plan of the residents' design that considered resident safety and the security of the community, the convenience of relocating (many of the residents are elderly and infirm), and access to public transportation, shopping, and community services. We worked with architectural historians, preservationists, environmentalists, health and social service providers, educators, legal consultants, and politicians to ensure the successful development and implementation of the Community Campus plan and to establish a viable new model for public housing.

In the arena of public housing, involvement of the architect has traditionally been with the developer and the local housing authorities as owner/clients. They have the resources to engage the services of the architect to bring form to their agenda, whereas the residents of public housing projects traditionally do not. Their lack of professional expertise is often confused with ignorance and indifference. Demonstration by professionals of support for tenant groups attempting to plan and program their living communities can lend credibility to their proposals. The architect will be able to influence discussion where community has even the most remote chance of developing. While opportunities do not abound in this country for professionals to reshape public policy, there is work to be done forging coalitions between policy makers and program recipients.

## CONCLUSION

In the year since the secretary endorsed the proposal, scant progress has been made in the negotiations between the APV residents, the Housing Authority, and HUD. Those negotiations have consisted of a series of wearisome and contentious meetings in which all assurances of cooperation and good faith on the part of HUD and HACH representatives disintegrated. Promises and commitments made to the residents were denied or retracted. The residents' judgment and intelligence were arrogantly and insolently disregarded. Attempts were made to pit them against each other and against their leadership. Funding was made contingent upon the residents' ability to perform task after tedious task requiring time, professional expertise and resources which, ironically, the funding (which after a year has not materialized) was supposed to have afforded.

The (unspoken) contention of the HACH and HUD representatives that these public housing residents are incapable of self-determination and rigor of purpose blatantly challenges the validity of the new HUD community partnership policy requiring community participation in neighborhood redevelopment. It raises questions of the departments' motivation and accountability. Is residents' participation called into question by hostile and resentful authorities or by authorities that have reason to suspect the motives and flout the abilities of public housing residents? By all accounts, when public housing residents have attempted self-management and innovative program implementation (with cooperation and support from the authorities) they have met with large measures of success. Does the new policy address the real problems plaguing a nation of neglected and beleaguered housing projects and the families who live in them, or is it just so much lip service paid to increasing indignation and rancor? Will the most recently issued directives from HUD to introduce comprehensive and community-driven planning and development be aborted in their gestation? In the final analysis who shall be held accountable for the success or failure of the initiatives and demonstration projects that do find funding and implementation?

The extent to which the vision of the Allen Parkway Community Campus and other similarly sighted initiatives can be realized is dependent upon the cooperation, support, and good faith of public officials at both local and federal levels. Where encouragement and support are not forthcoming, advocacy plays a critical role in facilitation and empowerment. The will and ability of the "partners at the table" to forge a mutually supportive coalition and thereby effect new policy means the difference for many people between a life with opportunities to grow and thrive in a healthy, benevolent environment, and a life of degradation, subordination, and misery.

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