Post Daily Magazine

SCATTERSITE HOUSING

FOREST HILLS & OTHER BATTLES

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ARTICLE III: Who Gets In?

PEOPLE, NOT BRICKS, are the stuff of public housing. This is the main lesson of a visit to the crowded interview room of the Housing Authority's offices at 250 Broadway.

"How many years does a person have to wait?" pleads an old white woman with red-veined cheeks and legs swathed in rags, tugging on the sleeve of an HA employe. "I'm not in this department," the employe shrugs.

The poor come here in throngs almost any afternoon to sit on hard benches, waiting their turn to persuade an interviewer of their eligibility for a key to an apartment in one of New York City's more than 190 public housing developments.

Who finally gets in?

The question is particularly timely in view of the current furor over the proposed low-income project in Forest Hills and the Lindsay administration's scatter-site housing program. The fear of crime, drug addiction and sanitation which people—rightly or wrongly—generally associate with city project tenants is the motive behind much of the opposition to low-income housing in stable, middle-income areas.

There are about 155,000 families—around 600,000 people—in the low-rent projects. That means that New York City is not only the biggest landlord in the city but that the public housing population here is greater than that of any other city in the state. Still, this is just a fraction of the poor in the city and about 149,000 families are now on the waiting list.

In other words, the demand far exceeds the supply.

"The great majority of the city's poor continue to live in old, privately owned structures," Roger Starr of the Citizens' Housing and Planning Council wrote recently. "One of the critical questions for public housing management in the city thus becomes: which of the poor shall live in public housing?"

To settle the matter, the HA has devised a complicated set of priorities for eligibility to which the applicants in the interview have to measure up.

The priorities start with any dislocated residents of the project site and go through a lengthy list of situations, from homeless families through families living in generally substandard conditions. (After applicants "in emergency need," the HA gives priority to Vietnam vets.)

The HA tries to screen out persons with recent criminal records, records of violent acts, known addicts, sex offenders and disruptive, destructive and anti-social families. But many of the procedures for tenant selection and eviction are under attack from civil liberties groups and anti-poverty lawyers.

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The Forest Hills controversy raises a number of tough questions about public housing. How many welfare families get into public housing? What's the crime rate in the projects? In the areas surrounding the projects? To what extent is public housing like a huge social welfare agency, grappling with the myriad problems of the poor, rather than merely sheltering them? Are poor families, welfare families or families headed by unwed mothers necessarily prone to criminal acts or destructive behavior?

Public housing here had traditionally been a haven for the working poor rather than the dependent poor. Furthermore, it used to be predominantly white.

"Why, when I was a kid," recalls HA Chairman Simeon Golar, a black, "we used to pass the Williamsburg Houses rather longingly."

Eligibility criteria, too, were always stiff.

"Years ago they used to screen like mad," says Mrs. Frieda Pravda, who lived in the Baruch Houses on the Lower East Side for 18 years. "Oh, did they screen! You had to show your marriage license, financial records, birth certificate for your kids."

The result was a racially mixed, though still predominantly white, housing population, including veterans using the GI Bill to further their education and other hard-working, socially mobile people but excluding most "troublemakers." Because of this, public projects were considered a good place to live and raise children. "It was a paradise," said her husband, Robert Pravda, with excusable hyperbole.

In the meantime, a remarkable migration was taking place which was to have a drastic impact on public housing. Poor blacks from the rural south and poor people from Puerto Rico inundated New York and other large cities in the latest of many waves of immigration to hit our urban centers. This postwar demographic event caught city planners unawares and created many problems for the cities. Gradually the projects became havens for the new immigrants.

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The criteria for admission to public housing were relaxed in 1967 after court decisions and other pressures in a time of social upheaval forced the HA to reexamine its policies: "The standards systematically excluded those in the most urgent need," said Golar. "Many welfare families, families with no male head of the household. What we gave with one hand we took away with the other."

The results were dramatic: Around 1969, households on public assistance made up around 16 per cent of the city project population. It has jumped to around 26 per cent and is steadily increasing. Some estimates put present admissions of welfare families into public housing at 56 per cent.

But these figures may give a false picture. Many welfare families are stable. For example, publicly assisted tenants include a great number of working families receiving "supplementary" grants and the elderly getting old-age benefits.

Indeed, it might even be argued that families on welfare or without male heads are not necessarily problem families.

"Families with problems, as opposed to problem families, need not be proscribed (from public housing)," contends I. D. Robbins, trustee and past president of the City Club of New York, "for they do not necessarily inflict their problems on their neighbors.

"Thus," he continues, "a well-ordered family of a mother and even several children without a resident father is no menace, whereas a regular family with a drug addict son who steals from neighbors may be intolerable."

Yet there is no doubt that a good number of "problem families" do make their way onto the public housing tenants' rolls and contribute to the projects' decay. A review of the scores of low-income and moderate-income complexes run by the city indicates there is no "typical project," since some are already in middle-class neighborhoods, many more are in marginal lower-middle-class neighborhoods, others in decaying or transitional neighborhoods and, still others, in the black and Puerto Rican ghettos.

There is also a policy of encouraging more stable project communities by not evicting public housing families who, after having lived in the project, work themselves up to an income level which exceeds the permitted limits. But the projects are wracked by problems that are symptoms of larger social ills and, according to a study called "The Public Interest" done two years ago by George Sternlieb, the only variable consistently related to substandard housing was the presence in the building of welfare families.

Pool Photo by Terence McCarten

Lillian Wald complex on the Lower East Side. Some 600,000 people live in low-rent projects.

A peculiar fact of "poverty economics" tends to increase the number of welfare families in public housing. Since the major share of the rent bill for welfare families is paid from state and federal budgets, it turns out that the city Dept. of Social Services has sometimes tended to pay higher rents in low-income projects for tenants on public assistance than working families pay for comparable apartments.

"The surcharge paid by the city to the Housing Authority," estimates Roger Starr, "runs as high as 69 per cent. At a time when the Authority is running badly in the red, welfare tenants provide it with some financial relief."

Related to such issues is the debate over crime rates in projects themselves and in the neighborhoods in which they are situated. Recently, Golar released statistics designed to show that the rate of crime in public housing was dramatically lower than in the rest of the city and, in many cases, lower than for the vicinity of the project. Rep. Herman Badillo backs him up.

Countering this is the argument that, often, criminals don't perform their dirty work in their own backyards.

"No great acuity is required to figure out," said one observer "that many crimes, such as robbing storekeepers, cannot be performed in housing projects, and that muggers and burglars may prefer to choose victims from the well-to-do outside the projects than from the poor within."

On the other hand, there seems little reason for Forest Hills residents to fear that the contemplated project there—even if it follows present plans and not some further compromise—will tip that neighborhood (which recent studies show to have one among the lowest per capita crime rates in the city) into a disaster area. Panic and hysteria, rather than a rational examination of the facts, often cloud discussion of crime and the Forest Hills project.

"Forest Hills is already a considerable compromise," says HUD regional director S. William Green.

He was referring to the fact that 341 units in the project are slated for the predominantly white and, almost without exception, stable and untroublesome elderly. Of the remaining 499 apartments most seen destined to be occupied by smaller families drawn from among the working poor. There will be only 160 apartments of three bedrooms and more which would tend to go to larger, often female-headed, poor black households.

The situation is not typical of projects throughout the city but stems from the fact that the HA is committed to choosing tenants for the project, first, from the Forest Hills area itself and, second, from Queens. (It remains to be seen, however, whether the Authority can keep that promise. Some predict that such selection procedures would trigger court challenges like the one the NAACP has threatened to mount.)

Nevertheless, it would seem that a community as large as Forest Hills with a population density of about 200 persons on each square block (the project, it is estimated, will bring in 2000 to 2800 people in all) could absorb such an influx even though the proposed complex is by far the largest scatter-site project planned.

Forest Hills aside, the HA is committed to the goal of keeping the public housing program from becoming nothing more than a sprawling social welfare agency.

It is noteworthy that the HA employs some 1585 police officers and offers free child care, counseling, recreational and other social services, indicating that the agency goes beyond its basic function of providing shelter to poor families.

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Simply stated, public projects house the poor and poor people have problems. There is considerable support for the view that the HA should have the right to throw out tenants whose problems are so great that they infringe on the rights of other poor tenants.

"The distinction between the working poor and the non-working poor may escape the middle-class observer," contends Roger Starr, "and most especially it seems to escape the observer bent on social reform. But it is clear enough to the working class and to the poor generally. It is the fatherless households that cause the most vandalism and are responsible for the greatest amount of crime, both on the streets and inside the housing projects."

Starr does not advocate excluding all fatherless families from public housing but urges recognition that "a few problem families can ruin it for the ones who want to have a decent place to live and raise their children."

Starr would get a quick nod of agreement from Beatrice Davis, a young black mother of six who warmed a bench in the HA interview room one day recently. She has lived in projects all her life and was now trying to get into another one, after the death of her mother and separation from her husband.

Mrs. Davis advocated fines for families with destructive children and tighter enforcement of the rules by housing management. "People only realize the value of an apartment in a project," she insisted sadly, "when they're out like me, trying to get in."

Continued Tomorrow.