

# The Right to the City

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**T**he symbolic launch of Chicago's [Plan for Transformation](#), the City's sweeping overhaul of its public housing, took place on December 12, 1998, more than a year before it was formalized as policy and christened with its Orwellian name. On that day, amid pomp and circumstance, the city demolished four vacant public housing high-rises by imploding them.

The event received massive attention. As the day approached, media coverage was akin to that for the St. Patrick's Day Parade or the Chicago Marathon. On the eve of the implosion, the *Chicago Tribune* published an article that provided a schedule, a map of the "spectator area," and a diagram showing how the buildings had been wired with explosives. The article included an interview with a demolition specialist who explained that the explosives were placed and timed so the structure would fall straight down, with each floor landing like a pancake on those below. "We do not blow buildings up," he said. "We let gravity tear buildings down."

Whatever the technical complexities involved in the implosions, the reporter had no doubt about their meaning. They "will serve," he wrote, "as a symbolic funeral" for the Chicago Housing Authority's "policy of warehousing the poor in high-rises." The *Tribune* editorial page underscored the point, hailing the event as "a televised tribute to the repeal of old mistakes and the laying of new foundations."

Known as the Lakefront Properties, the doomed buildings were located on the South Side at the edge of Lake Shore Drive. Each was 16 stories tall and contained 150 apartments. The plan was to replace them with a "mixed income community."

The implosion was scheduled to begin shortly after 8:00 am. The day was bright and clear; unseasonably mild for mid-December, with a brisk wind from the west.

The best vantage point was a sliver of parkland along the lakefront east of the Drive directly across from the buildings. People approached this spot from the north and from the south.



The first building to be demolished at Stateway Gardens with the downtown Chicago skyline in the background.

PHOTO BY PATRICIA EVANS

They came on foot, having left their cars some distance away, for there was little parking nearby. Many had cameras

and camcorders. Some had children in tow or on their shoulders. Estimated to be about 1,200, the crowd was largely composed of spectators from elsewhere in the city and the suburbs, most of them white, who would never have come to this part of the South Side under normal circumstances. Mixed among them were some former residents: people for whom the buildings had been home.

The dominant note of the gathering was celebratory. It was hard to place at first. A pilgrimage? A sporting event? It occurred to me later that what it most resembled was a public execution.

In preparation for the implosion, agile Bobcat bulldozers had pushed down the interior walls of the high-rises. The eviscerated structures had then been wired with explosives. A big yellow banner reading “Brandenburg Demolition” was strung across the front of one of the buildings.

Carefully choreographed by the City, the meaning of the spectacle was encapsulated in a simple equation:

*public housing high-rises = multiple urban ills  
ergo: demolition = progress*

The press was present in force, with cameras poised and at the ready to broadcast that message far and wide.

A viewing stand had been erected for dignitaries. They included HUD officials, local politicians and representatives of Chicago philanthropy. In a brief ceremony, several spoke of the significance of the event.

“This is the beginning of a new era,” said a HUD spokesperson.

“We look forward,” declared a MacArthur Foundation executive, “to a triumphant future.”

The crowd chanted a countdown—“three, two, one, zero!”—and the explosives were detonated. The noise was surprisingly loud.

Ten seconds passed. Three buildings gave way and collapsed, then a few seconds later the fourth. Their structural integrity was undone in an instant, yet the materials that composed them hung suspended in the air like someone mortally wounded who stays on his feet for a bewildered moment before falling to the ground. Then it was over. The buildings were gone.

The crowd cheered.

“Now you see it, now you don’t,” a man said to his companion.

For most looking on, it was pure spectacle. But for some the moment was colored by grief.

“All them memories over there,” a woman standing beside me said quietly. “They took it all away.”

Then something unexpected happened. A thick cloud of dust rose from the ground back up into the air as if attempting to reconstitute the ghost buildings. After a minute or so, it was carried east by the wind and enveloped the crowd. The coarse particles darkened the sky and reduced visibility to a few feet. They fell on everyone, covering their clothes, penetrating into every exposed opening. People coughed and rubbed their eyes. They scrambled to shield their children and protect their cameras. Some ran for cover.

After the bright rhetoric and dawn-of-a-new-day symbolism, the dark cloud descending equally and without distinction on

policymakers, spectators and former residents was as startling—as implicating—as being splattered with blood. Drifting out over the city, the windblown particles of what had once been a community foreshadowed a future in which the disappearing act we had just witnessed would have consequences.



**Resident Pat Evans and her son on the grounds of Stateway Gardens.**

PHOTO BY PATRICIA EVANS

## **“TRANSFORMATION”**

Seventeen years later, that future has arrived. During the intervening years, the sight of public housing high-rises being demolished, though never again imploded, became common in Chicago. In a remarkably short span of time, the archipelago of high-rise developments that had constituted a city within the city disappeared. The Robert Taylor Homes, Stateway Gardens, the Cabrini-Green Homes, Rockwell Gardens, the Ida B. Wells Homes, the Harold Ickes Homes—these and other developments were not simply demolished; they were erased. And almost overnight, it seemed, the land where they had stood reverted to urban prairie.

Today some 350 acres once inhabited by the poorest, most vulnerable residents of the city stand vacant.<sup>1</sup> Such mixed-income developments as have been built on former public housing sites are, for the most part, strangely un-urban—even anti-urban—places, and relations within them between market-rate and public housing residents are often toxic. The headlong implementation of the Plan has also had consequences for the fragile neighborhoods to which displaced public housing tenants were relocated, causing collateral damage to local institutions and almost surely contributing to spikes in the homicide rate.

Whatever else might be said about the Plan for Transformation, one thing is beyond question: the disappearing of places and people really works. To the extent the communities obliterated by the Plan can be said to survive, they are preserved in the memories, griefs and stories of those for whom they were home. They will never, however, be reconstituted as living places. They are utterly gone.

It is hard not to accept and accommodate to the altered facts on the ground. Yet the implications of doing so are profound. For that which has been disappeared remains powerfully present. The phenomenon is akin to black holes. Invisible to the eye, they can be detected by the ways their gravitational fields distort the visible world.

I witnessed this extraordinary process—this “transformation”—from beginning to end, on the ground in one of the communities “transformed”: the Stateway Gardens development, where I worked for more than a decade as an organizer and tenant advocate. The

attachment to place I observed among Stateway residents was unusually strong. This was due in no small part, I suspect, to the fact that it was a place for those for whom, within the American caste system, there was no other place.

Early in my immersion in Stateway, I learned from public health researcher and advocate Mindy Fullilove to reject the inevitable characterization of impoverished inner-city communities as “isolated.”<sup>2</sup> These communities are not isolated, she argues; they are abandoned. It was an important lesson—a critical distinction. Isolation suggests the poor and disfavored somehow moved away from the rest of the society. Abandonment, by contrast, asserts relationships and forms of accountability.

Yet to an extraordinary degree, conditions that should be the basis for calling various public and private institutions to account are evoked by those very institutions to advance their agendas. They make a massive ongoing investment in maintaining a narrative that absolves them of responsibility and blames residents for the condition of their neighborhood.

Among Gandhi’s greatest intellectual contributions is his insistence on the nexus between falsehood and violence: the former is necessarily enforced by the latter. In the case of Chicago’s public housing “transformation,” it was inevitable, given the character of the official narrative, that the process of demolition and forced relocation would do violence to the identities of residents.

Human beings are adaptive. Under conditions of abandonment,

they find ways to survive, to create meaning and beauty, to be at home in the world. So it was at Stateway and other high-rise public housing communities. It was my great good fortune to come to understand, not as an abstraction but as a daily reality, that Stateway



**Basketball tournament organized by young men at Stateway Gardens.**

PHOTO BY PATRICIA EVANS

Gardens—and by extension other public housing developments—were the sites of communities as complex and unfathomable, embracing as wide a spectrum of human variety, as any other.

I have written extensively about the afterlife of violence.<sup>3</sup> A central motif that emerges from the accounts of those who have suffered torture, rape and other violent assaults is the image of being torn out of the world, of having their connections—the relationships and attachments that give meaning to their lives—severed. Such is the nature, if not the degree, of the violence inflicted on Chicago public housing residents in the name of “new beginnings.”

Imagine having the known world, the world by which you know yourself, destroyed. Then imagine being told that this trauma was inflicted for your own good and that your grief over the loss is pathological.

That perverse logic was essential to the ideological underpinnings of the Plan. Central among them: anything is better than this. In the late 1990s, after allowing conditions in high-rise public housing to deteriorate over generations, the City suddenly announced that those conditions were intolerable. This apparent moral awakening did not take the form of confronting the mass of discreet practical problems arising from longstanding patterns of incompetence, inattention, corruption and racism. Rather, the city declared monolithic systems failure. This rhetorical sleight-of-hand produced the opposite of accountability. It effectively gave the political and economic interests that had built the high-rise developments *carte blanche* to profit from tearing it down.

Only the most robust democratic discourse could have withstood that powerful confluence of interests. Yet there was no such discourse. Housing policy experts and urban planners, civic leaders and philanthropists, journalists and editorial writers—none provided critical perspectives commensurate with the scale and implications of the Plan for Transformation. The silence of preservationists was particularly striking, in view of the fact that the Plan was comparable in its impact to the urban renewal projects of the 1950s and 60s that provoked the birth of their movement.<sup>4</sup>

The Chicago experience thus presents a question with implications that extend beyond Chicago: what responsibilities do





**Children at Stateway compete with one another, doing flips on to a discarded mattress.**

PHOTO BY PATRICIA EVANS

preservationists bear to abandoned places and to populations threatened with invisibility? Does historic preservation have any relevance to the experiences and priorities of those who struggle to remain visible in our cities and our democracy?

### **IMAGINING AN ALTERNATIVE**

A thought experiment: what qualities would have been required for the preservation movement to play a constructive role in Chicago's urban drama? What would a movement equipped to address current and future threats to other abandoned communities look like?

For one thing, the central focus of such a movement would be on places rather than buildings. It would recognize that places are dynamic and hence that it is necessary to think in ecological terms about the mesh of relationships that support their vitality, adaptability and resilience—qualities that such a movement would, above all, be dedicated to preserving and enhancing.

Paradoxically, such an orientation requires that preservationists look past the built environment—past an abandoned public housing high-rise, say—in order to discern the relational ecology essential to the character of the place for those living there. Such an approach requires an ethnographic openness to the variety of ways human beings adapt to particular circumstances. It is a

matter of asking what supports life in this place—and equally, what stunts life—without allowing moralistic judgments to immediately preempt the inquiry. (One of the most counterproductive and insulting aspects of the Plan for Transformation has been the confident ease with which it ascribes underclass deviance as measured against the gold standard of middle-class norms, as opposed to recognizing cultural difference.)

In order to discern what is valued by members of a given community, preservationists must be prepared to set aside their expertise with respect to the architecturally and historically significant and seek local knowledge. Not an easy dance to do, but necessary. For the true experts with respect to the qualities of a place are those living there. This is necessarily immersive work, a matter of putting aside preconceptions, exercising active curiosity, and listening deeply. The effort may seem disproportionate, but there are certain things that can only be learned on the ground.

The practice of preservation, as I am envisioning it, would recognize that the fate of places and communities is, first of all, determined in the semantic realm. This is one of the lessons bequeathed by the Chicago experience. Power does not impose itself nakedly. It requires ideological justification to facilitate its ends. That the official narrative is patently false, even absurd, doesn't matter so long as it is uncontested. What is required is not our belief but our acquiescence.

This dynamic gives rise to a sphere of potential resistance where preservationists might play an effective role as disinterested advocates of vital communities, challenging the disconnect between the official narrative and observable realities on the ground, and insisting on diagnostic clarity. As Vaclav Havel observed in another context, “a world of appearances trying to pass for reality” is vulnerable to any act that makes visible an alternative. “It is utterly unimportant,” he writes, “how large a space that alternative occupies: its power does not consist in its physical attributes but in the light it casts.”<sup>5</sup>

Returning to the Chicago experience, not only was the official narrative defamatory of residents, not only did it necessitate an assault on their identities, it was also stupefying. It stifled creativity



and hobbled adaptability. The fiction of monolithic systems failure—a failed experiment—necessitated the immensely wasteful destruction of a huge inventory of housing, a significant portion of which could have been reconfigured and rehabbed. The fiction that conditions in the developments were due to a design flaw—the high-rises themselves were to blame rather than gross negligence by the city-as-landlord—precluded the construction of any high-rises in redevelopment projects, even when conditions were optimal and more affordable housing could have thereby been created. Above all, the fiction that public housing communities were bad places—that anything was better than this—blinded those driving the process to resources within the communities that could have been drawn upon in a process of genuine renewal.

The work of challenging the “world of appearances trying to pass for reality” is thus of great practical importance. To the extent that it is successful, it opens up space for creativity and innovation. The preservation movement I am positing would vigorously inhabit that space. Its respect for and curiosity about the webs of meaning, patterns of usage, and strata of memory grounded in a particular place would almost surely yield design innovations and creative repurposing of familiar structures and materials. Most important, this quality of attention would contribute to more humane processes of development that honor memory and grief, thereby enabling community members to remain moored in the midst of change.

### **RECASTING PRESERVATION'S ROLE**

Is such a paradigm shift possible? George Orwell once observed that sometimes one’s “first duty” is “the restatement of the obvious.” In that spirit: the built environment testifies to past and current injustices. In abandoned communities, failures of democracy are manifest not only in disenfranchisement and patterns of violence arising from powerlessness but also in injuries to place that reflect and reinforce the social status of those living there. Those physical conditions are as essential to enforcing structures of inequality and exclusion as the disparities in policing that have commanded so much attention in the post-Ferguson era.

Viewed in such a light, the central assumption of the preservation movement—that attachment to place is a fundamental human need—is a demanding principle. It can be recast, in the idiom of the international human rights movement, as the right to the city. And it dictates that the movement directly engage the ways structural inequalities in our society are expressed, reinforced and *hidden* by the built environment. Could it be that a robust, inclusive future for this movement, so easily caricatured as elitist, turns on embracing the radical nature of its underlying premises and following where they lead? FJ

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- 1 This inventory will soon be reduced—not by construction of new housing but by deals the housing authority has entered into with big box stores and sports facilities hungry for large parcels of land.
- 2 For a description of Fullilove's current work, see Robert Sullivan, "The Town Shrink," *New York Times Magazine*, June 23, 2015.
- 3 See Jamie Kalven, *Working With Available Light: A Family's World After Violence* (W. W. Norton, 1999).
- 4 Two exceptions serve to sharpen the point. First, preservationists have supported the effort to establish a National Public Housing Museum in Chicago. Second, they successfully challenged plans to demolish the Lathrop Homes, the last major redevelopment project in the Chicago Housing Authority's portfolio, arguing that its architecture and landscaping are historically significant. Both are instances, however welcome, of traditional preservation advocacy. What preservationists did not do is engage the realities on the ground as perceived and experienced by residents. Nor did they contribute to a process by which the things residents valued about their places and wanted to preserve were acknowledged and given weight.
- 5 Vaclav Havel, "The Power of the Powerless," *Open Letters: Selected Writings, 1965-1990* (Vintage, 1992).



## VIDEO

Click here to hear presentation by Jamie Kalven at the James Marston Fitch Charitable Foundation Symposium, October 2014.