

The University of Chicago

**Poor White Chicago: The Complicated White Experience in  
Chicago Public Housing 1940-1960**

By

Samuel Edmundson

July 2024

A paper in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Arts degree in the Master of  
Arts Program in the Social Sciences

Faculty Advisor: Philip Garboden

Preceptor: John McCallum III

**Table of Contents**

Introduction.....	3
Literature Review.....	6
Methodology.....	12
White Public Housing.....	13
The Integration Paradox.....	17
The Unique Case of Cabrini Green.....	34
The Issue of Maintaining Whites in Chicago Public Housing.....	37
Conclusion .....	42
Bibliography (Primary Sources) .....	44
Bibliography (Secondary Sources) .....	46

## Introduction

Few histories conjure up the soreness of racial discrimination, bureaucratic infighting, failed investments, and gross mismanagement quite like that of public housing in the United States. Originally implemented during the Great Depression through the Public Works Administration, public housing was envisioned as a government led intervention to ensure that Americans in economic crisis could still access affordable housing. Exemplifying how severe the housing shortage was, in Chicago alone from 1930 to 1938 a total of 18,221 dwellings were demolished and only 7,619 new ones were built in a city whose population was growing.<sup>1</sup> According to findings by the National Association of Real Estate Boards in 1936, Chicago had one of the lowest national vacancy rates with occupation of single-family dwellings at 98% and apartments at 97%, with 95% typically indicating a severe shortage. These rates were common across the country as the private real estate market simply was not meeting demands.<sup>2</sup> As a consequence, over the course of the twentieth century billions of federal dollars were invested in the construction of low-income housing projects. In the few decades after its hopeful inception, however, public housing became synonymous with racism, urban poverty, poor living conditions, and failure as many projects deteriorated or never truly accomplished their goals to provide decent housing security. Nowhere was this failure more evident than in Chicago under the Chicago Housing Authority (CHA).

In 1965, roughly three decades after its founding, the court ruling *Gautreaux v. Chicago Housing Authority* found the CHA guilty of such gross malpractice in terms of racial discrimination that it was placed under a receivership which wasn't lifted until 2010. The state of

---

<sup>1</sup> Devereux Bowley, *The Poorhouse: Subsidized Housing in Chicago*, (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2012), 15.

<sup>2</sup> "Nation Nears Home Shortage, Survey Finds," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, March 15, 1936.

the CHAs most notorious high-rise projects remained in such poor conditions, that from 2000 to 2022 they were systematically demolished in a so called “Plan for Transformation” which has been plagued by its own unfulfilled promises.<sup>3</sup> This controversial history has provided a wellspring of documentation which historians have poured through to uncover and explain stories of racism, segregation, poor urban planning, and institutional failure. This effort has produced many remarkable works of urban history which provide compelling theories on why public housing failed and even for the shape of our cities today.<sup>4</sup> Most of these histories, however, fail to emphasize a group of people which pose a sort of paradox in modern perceptions of public housing: poor whites.

For many who lived through the latter life of public housing and who may have even witnessed the CHA projects downfall, the residents of public housing, and the impoverished images surrounding it, were primarily black people. Even in 2023, a report concerning Fair Housing published by the City of Chicago found that 75% of its public housing residents were black.<sup>5</sup> This overrepresentation of black people in Chicago public housing has deep roots in chronic disadvantages endured by black communities and has been the case throughout much of the late twentieth century. Many histories have been written on the structural inequalities and malicious planning which led to this disproportionate representation of black tenants in

---

<sup>3</sup> The Chicago Housing Authority, “About,” The Chicago Housing Authority, accessed March 7, 2024, <https://www.thecha.org/about#:~:text=After%20the%201965%20landmark%20court,was%20lifted%20in%20May%202010.>

<sup>4</sup> For examples, see Arnold R. Hirsch, *Making the Second Ghetto: Race and Housing in Chicago, 1940-1960*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2021). Arnold R. Hirsch “Massive Resistance in the Urban North: Trumbull Park, Chicago, 1953-1966,” *The Journal of American History* 82, no. 2 (1995): 522–550. Bradford D. Hunt, “What Went Wrong with Public Housing in Chicago? A History of the Robert Taylor Homes,” *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* (1998-) 94, no. 1 (2001): 96-123. Devereux Bowly, *The Poorhouse: Subsidized Housing in Chicago*, (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2012). Joel Rast, *The Origins of the Dual City: Housing, Race, and Redevelopment in Twentieth Century Chicago*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019). Among others.

<sup>5</sup> City of Chicago, “Chicago Blueprint for Fair Housing,” Chicago.gov, May 2023, <https://www.chicago.gov/city/en/sites/blueprint-for-fair-housing/home.html>.

government housing considering factors such as racialized site selection, screening practices, and white supremacist violence.<sup>6</sup> Commentary on the white experience of public housing has largely remained secondary in evaluations of the CHA, but for too long whiteness as a racial category has escaped critical analysis. Studying the white experience in Chicago public housing from 1940 to 1960 reveals complications to traditional assumptions about white people's situations during this period and challenges conclusions which have been drawn about the nature of integration, racial conflict, and eventual trajectory of public housing in Chicago.

This thesis has three main findings. First, accounts from whites during this period in CHA history reveals that CHA projects served as unique environments for white ethnic interactions and fostered a collective sense of community. Secondly, whites in public housing seemed far more receptive to integration than whites in surrounding communities. The backlash from whites in surrounding communities seems to correlate with the influence of private property concerns and localized, exclusive, community politics that can be seen in other studies.<sup>7</sup> Thirdly, by looking at the changing lives of white tenants, the trajectory of public housing into becoming a predominately black space in Chicago is seen as a result of racialized economic disparities rather than institutionalized racist decision making. All of these findings varyingly support or complicate many established interpretations which will be unpacked throughout this paper.

This thesis will emphasize the period from 1940 to 1960 because it represents a window of time where integrationist efforts began and stark color lines between white and black were being irritated. Multiple race riots broke out around CHA projects during this period, more than any other, forcing whites both inside and around the projects to rationalize and define their

---

<sup>6</sup> See Hirsch, *Making the Second Ghetto* and Hunt, *Blueprint for Disaster*.

<sup>7</sup> See Hirsch, *Making the Second Ghetto* and David M. P. Freund, *Colored Property: State Policy and White Racial Politics in Suburban America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007). Among others.

positions in regard to race. The popular societal view that whites represented an affluent suburban middle class also began during this period and a study of poor whites in government assisted housing adds to other scholarship complicating this idea. The 1960s provides a natural drop off to the study of white experience in CHA housing as the period marked the shift towards the CHAs malicious policies to concentrate public housing in black neighborhoods at the behest of the city council and other actors.<sup>8</sup>

Before any presentation of the findings of this research, however, it is critical to understand the existing literature on the subject of the CHA and broader urban crisis of the mid twentieth century. This thesis serves as a broad critique of the sometimes-vague ways in which white attitudes, situations, and motivations are analyzed in the literature; especially those of whites in CHA housing. While existing works contain remarkable findings on black disadvantage and white supremacy, few key into the nuances of the white identity and important influencers/differences in white actions.

### **Literature Review**

Many historians have grappled with the events that turned the CHA from a well-intentioned municipal agency to a striking symbol of policy failure. The answers entangle public housing with broader histories of race relations, suburbanization, and policy initiatives during the urban crisis of the mid twentieth century. Historical accounts vary in their emphasis on race, institutionalism, or social history for the character of public housing, and to a notable extent, the developmental trajectory of cities themselves. Though they engage with many aspects of the CHA, few specifically grapple with the white experience in public housing.

---

<sup>8</sup> J.S. Fuerst and Bradford D. Hunt, *When Public Housing Was Paradise: Building Community in Chicago*, (Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 2005), 38.

From its very beginning public housing and race were tied together. Segregation was the law of the land and exclusionary housing covenants, redlining, and unabashed white violence kept most urban centers like Chicago in a black and white state. The CHA, along with many others, kept in line with this regime by adhering to the Neighborhood Composition policy, which held that residents of any housing project had to be of the same racial makeup as their surrounding community.<sup>9</sup> As race relations changed, integration began, and whites increasingly moved to exclusionary suburbs, the status of public housing was increasingly contested by racially motivated whites and city councils. In light of this development, many historians have emphasized the role that race has played in shaping public housing history. In these histories race and racism are the underpinning factors for the later failures of government investment into public housing.

One seminal work which has shaped the way scholars view race and housing in Chicago is Arnold Hirsch's *Making the Second Ghetto: Race and Housing in Chicago 1940-1960*, originally published in 1983. Hirsch unpacks race relations as they developed over the twentieth century in Chicago.<sup>10</sup> Hirsch found that the segregation of Chicago from 1940-1960 was not inevitable, but rather the result of active governmental initiatives and investments in line with growing and evolving white hostilities. He asserts that the CHA concentrated public housing in grim high rises in traditionally black neighborhoods.<sup>11</sup> Though ostensibly economically motivated, white resistance toward housing projects led to the hijacking of site selection by the city council and created conditions for the concentration of public housing in black

---

<sup>9</sup> Betsey Martens, Elizabeth Glenn, and Tiffany Mangum, "Race, Equity and Housing: The Early Years," The National Association of Housing and Redevelopment Officials (NAHRO), February 1, 2021, [https://www.nahro.org/journal\\_article/race-equity-and-housing-the-early-years/](https://www.nahro.org/journal_article/race-equity-and-housing-the-early-years/)

<sup>10</sup> Arnold R. Hirsch, *Making the Second Ghetto: Race and Housing in Chicago, 1940-1960*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2021), 286-358.

<sup>11</sup> Hirsch, *Making the Second Ghetto*, 5-12.

neighborhoods, often the target of such renewal programs. These actions, Hirsch contends, created dire racial consequences and inequalities through poverty concentration and neglect which persist today.<sup>12</sup>

Hirsch also countered narratives of violent racism as a distinctly southern phenomenon through the case study of CHA's attempts to integrate the Trumbull Park housing project. When the Howards, a black family, passed under the CHA's informal segregationist practices aiming to mitigate racial tension and moved into the all-white housing project in South Dearborn, hundreds of whites tormented, attacked, and taunted them. Following court rulings in favor of integration and some integrationist minded leadership in the CHA, the CHA maintained the black population at Trumbull Park as best it could. However, the harassment, including stones being thrown, was so intense that black residents could not go into the broader community without armed police escorts throughout much of the 1960s.<sup>13</sup> This complimentary work of Hirsch's again demonstrates how bitter Chicago whites had become toward public housing, as they saw it as a tool for governmentally backed black intrusion. However, an interesting phenomenon was occurring within the partially integrated housing projects themselves which Hirsch only briefly mentions.

Both of Hirsch's works offer well researched accounts attempting to explain how racial discrimination persisted in Chicago throughout the course of integration, but there are a few loose threads in his analysis. In *Making the Second Ghetto* Hirsch reveals how incredibly hostile whites and misguided agencies like the CHA contributed toward extending racial discrimination and segregation, though he does not offer a full analysis of white behavior beyond their hostile or

---

<sup>12</sup> Hirsch, *Making the Second Ghetto*, 129-134.

<sup>13</sup> Arnold R. Hirsch "Massive Resistance in the Urban North: Trumbull Park, Chicago, 1953-1966," *The Journal of American History* 82, no. 2 (1995): 522-550.



neglectful actions towards black people. This lack of analysis becomes more problematic when in his other work on Trumbull Park he makes mention of, but quickly dismisses, an unusual feature of race relations at the time. Hirsch states that in the laundry rooms candid interracial conversations often occurred in stark contrast to the constant harassment and threats of violence outside the project. One black resident even mentioned making social calls and being on a first name basis with their white neighbor. Hirsch makes clear, however, that when out in public this kind of interracial friendliness was incredibly rare, but it poses a question about the perspectives of whites who lived in public housing vs. whites who lived outside of it which Hirsch does not explore in either of his works.<sup>14</sup> According to Hirsch's white backlash rationality whites who were being made to live in the same projects as blacks should have had stronger reactions than the surrounding community. As will be shown later, other histories on CHA public housing, even those which emphasize race, don't entirely unpack the perspective of whites in the projects and instead highlight and rely on a more generalized sense of white backlash in communities where projects are located.

Other notable studies such as Sugrue's *The Origins of the Urban Crisis* mirror Hirsch's findings. Sugrue examines Detroit's decline, blaming racism and actively growing inequalities, on the white flight of the affluent middle class along alongside other dubious side effects of the private market.<sup>15</sup> Detroit has many striking similarities to other northern cities during the period like Chicago, which also experienced an increased black population from the great migration and turbulent decline amidst suburbanization. Racial matters, as is seen in other works, were catalyzed by public housing.

---

<sup>14</sup> Hirsch, "Massive Resistance," 522–550.

<sup>15</sup> Thomas J. Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 1-5.

Sugrue talks about the role of public housing in Detroit's broader history in Ch. 3 "The Coffin of Peace: The Containment of Public Housing." In his discussion about the effects of public housing policy on the city and its trajectory, Sugrue makes a similar argument to Hirsch in asserting public housing practices led to the continued segregation and ghettoization of Detroit. Like in Chicago, white homeownership communities in Detroit would frequently mobilize and threaten white violence whenever an attempt was made by the local and federal housing authorities to establish public housing in or even near their neighborhoods, motivated by racist stereotypes of the threat posed by black intrusion on their property values. Sugrue poses this as a stark departure from the original broad base of support that New Deal programs like public housing enjoyed. As he lays out in the chapter, the private housing accessible to many white communities through discriminatory federally backed mortgages created a situation in Detroit and many other northern cities where a white racially motivated group of private homeowners would fight to uphold exclusionary communities and undermine efforts to expand or even establish public housing.<sup>16</sup> As can be inferred, this created greater and greater concentrations of poverty in public housing in select minority tracts of the city center, which led to limited opportunities, a declining tax base within the city, and many other factors contributing towards decline, which all manifested from racial responses to such housing.

Another work that contains significant commentaries on race as its ties to urban developments is *American Babylon* by Robert Self. *American Babylon* in particular offers a slight counter to Hirsch's focus on the creation of the second ghetto as it contends that focusing solely on shaping governmental forces obscures black agency and other developing methods of resistance in the urban environment, ultimately culminating in the Civil Rights Movement.

---

<sup>16</sup> Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis*, 57-63.

Rather, using a case study of Oakland California, Self contends that the postwar period of urban history is best understood as a deeper far-ranging racialized battle over land, taxes, housing, and politics all in contention with suburbanization.<sup>17</sup> One story of public housing in the Oakland area takes on new light as Self shows how black communities actively fought for expanded housing projects opposed by many white suburban Oakland property owners and real estate groups in an attempt to alleviate poor housing conditions.<sup>18</sup> While Self doesn't make any far flung arguments regarding public housing in Chicago, his introduction of the racial suburban vs. urban competition introduces some ideas about why public housing may have suffered under the weight of the resources and power going towards white suburbia. If this period was defined by an idealistic white suburban and black urban economic battle, public housing was doomed to suffer as low-income urbanites who needed it most were not in control of the liberal political economy which favored localized power and, consequently, white exclusionary suburbanization.

This contention between the exclusive white suburbs and resistance to any expansion of public housing is also reflected in *Colored Property: State Policy & White Racial Politics in Suburban America* by David M. P. Freund. Freund presents in the first half of his work how federal housing assistance programs during the Great Depression, like mortgage insurance, excluded many blacks and facilitated the creation of an affluent white suburban middle class who were paradoxically fostered to believe their situation was due to private economic success instead of government intervention. In part two of his work Freund demonstrates how these newly situated whites began energetically engaging in the shaping of exclusionary practices in their local government and communities in line with what they rationalized to be the economic

---

<sup>17</sup> Robert O. Self, *American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Postwar Oakland*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 1-5.

<sup>18</sup> Self, *American Babylon*, 145-147.

imperative of keeping good, subversively not black or poor, neighbors. Black neighbors and anything associated with them were being fought against as a threat to white real estate values. Though Freund exemplifies cases of white suburban communities in Detroit, like Sugrue, the violence and vitriol that met black families even potentially moving into these communities closely mirrored accounts in Hirsch's work on inner city neighborhoods.<sup>19</sup>

Sugrue and Freund's emphasis on white property owner backlash is something the findings of this thesis align with. What they fail to elaborate on, however, is anything regarding the white experience within the public housing that is being contested. In filling this gap with a case study in Chicago, this thesis hopes to reach at the greater nuances of the white experience during this period.

### **Methodology**

To uncover what the white experience of public housing was, this paper will synthesize a wide range of material ranging from census records, newspapers, city council meeting minutes, and official CHA documents all commenting on conditions and characteristic within public housing. Many of these documents have been used in other studies but few of them have been interpreted with a strict eye interested in critically examining the racial experience and attitudes of whites. This paper has been guided by a few broad exploratory research questions: how was white space constructed, changed, and maintained in Chicago public housing? What was the general experience of white residents of the CHA? And how did the experience of whites in public housing compare with those outside of it?

The term "white" during this period is immediately unwieldy as many different ethnicities and nationalities had not yet been popularly accepted alongside the infamous ranks of

---

<sup>19</sup> David M. P. Freund, *Colored Property: State Policy and White Racial Politics in Suburban America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 32-44.

white Anglo Saxon protestants. Polish, Germans, Irish, Italians, Russian, among many other different white ethnicities were prevalent in Chicago during this period and had histories of inter-ethnic conflict with nativist white Americans and each other. When the term white is used in this paper it will broadly be referencing all these nationalities with a slight bias towards the modern mainstream perception of whiteness. As will be demonstrated in this paper, the 1940s to the 1960s represented a remarkable period of white inclusion even during violent black exclusion. This inclusivity was especially prevalent in public housing.

This paper relies heavily on personal accounts of people who lived in public housing during this period which are presented against other information about their experience from other sources. While these personal accounts can be immediately suspected as idealized or as the exceptions, as has often been the case in other works, a broader look at the situation they were coming from, alongside their number, offers a compelling case to take them seriously. The following sections are organized based on the topic. The first deals with the demographic situation of white public housing, the second unpacks the paradoxical openness of the many public housing whites to integration, the third deals with the exceptional case of race relations at Cabrini Green, and the final section tracks the departure of whites from CHA housing.

### **White Public Housing**

In 1950 the CHA operated a total of 42 different housing projects ranging from temporary veteran housing, urban renewal relocation housing, to permanent low-income residences. Out of the 42, 11 were permanent projects for all Chicago's low-income citizens.<sup>20</sup> 4 of these 11 projects, dating back to the enforcement of the Neighborhood Composition Act, had entirely white tenants. These four projects were the Trumbull Park, Julia C. Lathrop, Bridgeport, and

---

<sup>20</sup> Chicago Housing Authority, Chicago, IL, 1950, *Annual Report 1950*, Chicago History Museum, 1-5.

Lawndale homes.<sup>21</sup> This section is dedicated to unpacking the most general sense of the character of white ethnicities in CHA housing and finds that there was significant inter-ethnic cooperation and openness fostered by the environment around early CHA projects and the situation of their tenants.

Though racially divided from the start, a person's eligibility to become a public housing resident was determined solely by their income. In a 1952 report by the CHA, it was observed that, while income limits for new residents frequently fluctuated to meet need or changing circumstances, the CHA tried to target the lowest third of families.<sup>22</sup> In 1952 the average income of residents in CHA housing was \$2,525 while the average income city wide was \$4,525. With the advent of World War II, veteran projects, and urban renewal income limits were raised as housing needs due to relocation and shortages became more pronounced. In general, the CHA adjusted tenants' rents on an individual case level with charges being roughly 1/5 of their annual income, no matter the level. Over the course of the 1950s and later decades of the twentieth century, residents of public housings income dropped sharply as the higher income war workers, veterans, and skilled laborers were eventually able to, or forced to by decreasing income limits, move onto opportunities outside of the housing. This left the CHA with residents of lower and lower income as it tried to support its goals of housing security. In 1952 only 29% of CHA tenants received public aid.<sup>23</sup> In 1974 81% of families relied on aid for dependent children alone and a further 77% of households were at or below the poverty line.<sup>24</sup> While this transition alone is important, for the purposes of this study, from 1940-1960 it is apparent that white residents of public housing, while poor, were not always the poorest.

---

<sup>21</sup> L. F. Palmer Jr. "Family Prisoner of Mob Two Weeks," *The Chicago Defender*, August 22, 1953.

<sup>22</sup> Chicago Housing Authority, Chicago, IL, 1952, *Annual Report 1952*, Chicago History Museum, 23.

<sup>23</sup> Chicago Housing Authority, *Annual Report 1952*, 22-23.

<sup>24</sup> Chicago Housing Authority, Chicago, IL, 1975, *Annual Report 1974-1975*, Chicago History Museum, 3-8.

Beyond observing the incomes of whites in public housing, another interesting development is apparent when the demographics of whites in public housing are analyzed. Many scholars have attempted to explain the process by which ethnic whites eventually became accepted under mainstream white demographic with ranging emphasis on their inclusion in suburbanization, participation in racial clashes during the Civil Rights Era, to inclusion in government programs aimed at whites. While these explanations all have solid bases, another Chicago specific example emerges when observing whites in CHA public housing.

Whether they were Polish, German, Scottish, Jewish, or any other ethnicity the CHA admitted ethnic whites and held them under universal standards in what was seen by senior CHA officials as a chance to test their progressive beliefs that, if given the means, low-income citizens coming from slums could be reformed and empowered. Much of the design of CHA housing during this period was focused on empowering, taking care of, and rehabilitating residents. Elizabeth Wood worked extensively with community churches, schools, and other organizations around projects to implement community building programs, activities, and services for tenants. For example, at Leclaire Courts project manager Winston Kennedy worked closely with schools to provide after school activities to project kids to help occupy them while their parents were still at work. Community centers, health services, tenant councils, and other project events provided tenants with communal opportunities which were absent in most of the dilapidated environments they came from and otherwise wouldn't have access to.<sup>25</sup> Due to the CHAs commitment to social services, whites of similar status, regardless of ethnicity, were brought together and socialized in ways which they hadn't been before.

---

<sup>25</sup> Fuerst, *When Public Housing Was Paradise*, 4-37.

One account exemplifying the mixing of white identity in CHA housing comes from the Gorsuch family who lived in the Julia C. Lathrop project from 1938 to 1954 when they moved out to buy their own home. Reminiscing on her time in the project, Mrs. Gorsuch stated “At Lathrop, we had all nationalities—German, Irish, Polish—and its one of the experiences I will always remember. That, and the fact that most everyone shared their neighbors’ troubles and tried to help mend them.”<sup>26</sup> Mrs. Gorsuch account reflects on her time fondly and could be dismissed, as has often been the case, as romanticized or idealistically used by the CHA. The issue with this interpretation is that the positivity of the Gorsuch account is reflected in many others across the CHA projects.

Phyllis Offord, black, was a six-year-old when her family moved into LeClaire courts in 1951 and offers an account of the white ethnic/racial atmosphere of the project. “There were Polish, Latinos, Irish, Jews. It was a melting pot... It was like being in a small country town.”<sup>27</sup> Gwendolyn Duncan Alexander, black, was one of the first residents in the Cabrini Green project in 1943 and comments on the white racial situation. Alexander reminisced, “Cabrini was really ideal. We had Mexicans, we had Irish, we had Italians. My best girlfriend was German. It was very homogenous. We were closer than heterogeneous.”<sup>28</sup> Brushing aside the remarkably positive interracial accounts from these two black women for now, clearly white ethnics had much more common ground and friendly interactions than can be dismissed.

This common sentiment dominated many of the upwardly mobile whites in public housing during the period and its tone helps set the basis to understand later events. A collective sense of purpose, of achieving a better lot in life was present among many whites in public

---

<sup>26</sup> Chicago Housing Authority, Chicago, IL, 1954, *Annual Report 1954*, Chicago History Museum, pg. 12.

<sup>27</sup> Fuerst, *When Public Housing Was Paradise*, 38.

<sup>28</sup> Fuerst, *When Public Housing Was Paradise*, 105.



housing throughout this period. Even as late as 1962, David Doran, white, stated about the mixed-race Lawndale Gardens that, “In the project, we were all on the same level.”<sup>29</sup> The spirit of public housing was decidedly communal and empowering.

Impoverished whites were not the only residents of CHA housing during this period either, as Chicago experienced one of its worst housing shortages since the great fire. Across the city, at the same time as vacancies were coming to an extreme low, many of the city’s residential dwellings were aging and decaying. Compounding this fact were the gross housing practices of landlords to exploit the increased housing demand by black Americans moving to the city. Across segregated black Chicago, apartments that were intended for a family or single tenant were cut up and hastily divided to take advantage of the high demand and vulnerability of black buyers. Termed Kitchenettes, this housing practice worsened living condition across black Chicago. Beginning in the late 1940s the city sought to address these expanding and dismal slums in a multipronged approach which included relocating slum dwellers into public housing. As it would happen, the process of relocation brought whites both in and outside of public housing face to face with black residents in a new and challenging way.<sup>30</sup>

### **The Integration Paradox**

The CHA had many roles in the City of Chicago, but one of its most interesting was a force pushing for integration during the 1940s and 50s. After the events of World War II Chicago newspapers like the *Defender* circulated stories decrying black citizens second rate status and drew parallels between the segregated Jim Crow state of the city and fascism.<sup>31</sup> Integrationist sentiment was in the air and black communities with their supporters were ready to push for it. In

---

<sup>29</sup> Fuerst, *When Public Housing Was Paradise*, 123.

<sup>30</sup> Hirsch, *Making the Second Ghetto*, 5-42.

<sup>31</sup> “It Happens in Chicago,” *The Chicago Defender*, December 14, 1946.

the CHA itself, sympathetic left-wing progressives like Executive Secretary Elizabeth Wood began to eye public housing as a tool for integration. As Wood stated, even Illinois State law technically held that no officer of a municipal corporation should deny anyone its accommodations based on race or religion.<sup>32</sup> The legacy of the neighborhood composition act was being challenged by the CHA and its officials. The CHA, however, would find itself torn between its push for non-discriminatory policies and the deeply racist sentiments of the white communities it tried to integrate.

The history of the violent white backlash to the CHAs integrative actions during this period is well documented, but many treat resistance as vague acts of white supremacy with little analysis of specific motivations, situations, and even differences between white actors. Keeping with the focus on white experience in public housing, this paper finds evidence pointing towards an interesting paradox. Though whites in public housing were on the frontlines of the CHAs integrative efforts, they were generally more open to integration of their projects than surrounding white communities. Evidence suggests this trend is due primarily to the private property interests and competitive market anxieties of whites in neighborhoods adjacent to integrated housing, motivations which were absent inside the projects themselves. As will be demonstrated, positive interracial interaction inside public housing complicates the findings of Hunt and Hirsch on racism while strengthening the support for other market orientated claims such as in the work of Freund. To explore differences between white reactions/motivations this section will recount the well recorded examples of the Airport Homes, Fernwood, and Trumbull Park race riots while interweaving revelatory information regarding lesser-known projects and incidents.

---

<sup>32</sup> "Housing Projects Give 85 Vets Chicago Homes," *The Chicago Defender*, December 28, 1946.

The advent of temporary veteran housing in the Post World War II period was the CHAs first opportunity to cut its teeth in de-segregation. Annual reports of the CHA to the city council detail how severe the post-war housing shortage was among veterans with a total of 120,000 married service members coming back to the city in need of housing in 1945.<sup>33</sup> Due to low vacancy rates, veterans were forced to bunk with family or find other often unsustainable forms of accommodation. To address this issue the CHA, under the Emergency Veterans Re-Use Housing Program passed by Congress in 1945, began erecting various kinds of temporary veteran housing units across the city.<sup>34</sup> These temporary units were never designed to be permanent like some of their low-income counterparts, but they would provide decent housing to veterans while other accommodations were made. With limited options, vacant land was rented by the Board of Education, the Forest Preserve, Sanitary, and Park Districts to the CHA for a total of \$1 a year. As it didn't require the official ownership of land, the CHA did not need City Council or community approval. Most of the land available to the CHA was in outlying white communities.<sup>35</sup> As veterans, black and white, started pouring back to Chicago important questions loomed: how would the race lines fall in such housing and how would surrounding white communities react?

In 1946, the CHA Airport Homes gave a clear answer. One of the CHAs first constructions, the Airport Homes already had a deeply problematic start not only with the community surrounding it, but veterans themselves. The CHA had run into numerous issues in trying to establish temporary units from unexpected costs, utility shortages, and a generally slow construction time. In response to these delays and what was perceived to be CHA incompetency,

---

<sup>33</sup> Chicago Housing Authority, Chicago, IL, 1947, *Annual Report 1947*, Chicago History Museum, 20.

<sup>34</sup> Hunt, *Blueprint for Disaster*, 80.

<sup>35</sup> Chicago Housing Authority, *Annual Report 1947*, 19-24.

groups of veterans occupied the housing project before tenants officially signed their leases. One opinion coming from a Vet published in the *Chicago Tribune* decries the sloth of the CHA by claiming had they not caused a controversy, it may have been even longer until they were allowed to move in.<sup>36</sup> Rumors that the project was to be integrated also played a large role with some white squatters admitting to racist motivations as many believed black vets would be admitted to the project which was situated in the all-white neighborhood of West Lawn. The squatters were eventually removed under the pressure of pending legal action, but their fight for racist exclusion would soon come to a head.<sup>37</sup>

On November 16, 1946, the CHA attempted to move one black family into the project and the community's reaction was fierce. Upon hearing of the new residents, mobs of working-class whites from the surrounding neighborhood gathered and descended upon the project throwing stones and shouting racial obscenities. Though police and local church leaders had been warned in advance to prepare for such an event, the overwhelmed family quickly resolved to leave and were only able to do so under a police escort.<sup>38</sup> In response to the violence, Mayor Edward Kelly came out in support of the CHAs attempt on integration stating that "all law-abiding citizens may be assured of their right to live peaceably anywhere in Chicago."<sup>39</sup> The appeal meant little to locals however as two hundred whites marched on city hall with their Alderman, Michael Hogan, crying out against integration and demanding the CHA be curbed and brought under the control of the city council. Despite this outcry and under pressure, the CHA doubled down on its stance and attempted to move other black families into the project, but

---

<sup>36</sup> "Voice of the People: Squatters Were Useful," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, November 22, 1946.

<sup>37</sup> Chicago Housing Authority, *Annual Report 1947*, 24.

<sup>38</sup> Hunt, *Blueprint for Disaster*, 80.

<sup>39</sup> "Mayor Assures Vet Protection Hits Race Violence in Chicago Housing," *The Chicago Defender*, November 30, 1946.

another mob descended, causing them to flee.<sup>40</sup> The integration of the Airport Homes had failed, and black families were escorted away from the violent gunslinging and rock throwing mobs of whites.

The most obvious interpretation of events at the Airport Homes is that of classic white supremacy/intolerance. This is certainly prevalent in the interpretations of Hirsch and Hunt who recount the incident in *Making the Second Ghetto* and *Blueprint for Disaster* respectively. In Bradfords account, institutional documents and reporting reveal the incident at the Airport Homes as a turning point in CHA history as its integrationist goals made it a clear antagonist for racial status quo minded city council members and racist whites.<sup>41</sup> In Hirsch the Airport Homes, as well as other riots, are similarly used to draw a change in the CHA into a racially antagonistic force in the city. Hirsch goes further, however, tying the vicious reaction of whites to the greater rupture and insecurity of white ethnic neighborhoods under the succession happening across the city due to the crowded black population leaving the traditional black belt.<sup>42</sup> Interesting to note, neither Hirsch nor Bradford makes any analytical mention of the responses of whites inside the housing projects. In fact, most of their analyses treat white backlash as a rather generally accepted truth for the group, with views only divided between the personal political beliefs of exclusionary racists and progressive integrationists. While elements of traditional white supremacy are no doubt prevalent in the case of the Airport Homes among all white actors, a broader look at the details of the event and other veteran housing projects reveal important distinctions from some whites in temporary housing vs those in the neighborhoods surrounding it.

---

<sup>40</sup> Hunt, *Blueprint for Disaster*, 80.

<sup>41</sup> Hunt, *Blueprint for Disaster*, 79-83.

<sup>42</sup> Hirsch, *Making the Second Ghetto*, 55.

In a 1947 annual report to the City Council, the CHA describes the incident at the Airport Homes with dismay as they concede the intolerance of whites had hampered their efforts to provide housing to all the neediest groups equitably. Moving beyond the discussion of the Airport Homes, however, the report reveals that out of 20 of the temporary housing projects, 11 had successfully maintained interracial residents. In fact, 14% of the families living in veteran housing were non-white, 12% black.<sup>43</sup> The *Defender* breaks down the population of one particularly striking example of integration, the Foster Avenue project, which hosted 22 black residents in a 183-unit project.<sup>44</sup> Though it should be taken with a grain of salt as there are no specific personal accounts offered, the CHA even claims that the interracial project's tenants were either indifferent or warm toward the idea of integrated living. In a photo included in the report depicting the Sauganash homes, a black tenant is seen helping a group of white residents construct a communally funded recreation building (See Figure 1).<sup>45</sup> These instances of positive racial interactions within public housing aren't well captured in Hirsch and Bradford's accounts of CHA history as they dismiss or fail to mention it. In consideration with other factors, evidence

---

<sup>43</sup> Chicago Housing Authority, *Annual Report 1947*, 19-24.

<sup>44</sup> Chicago Housing Authority, *Annual Report 1947*, 19-24.

<sup>45</sup> Chicago Housing Authority, *Annual Report 1947*, 24.

leans towards a dichotomy in white responses toward integration between those inside and certain groups around public housing projects.



**Figure 1** – Image appeared on pg. 24 of the 1947 CHA annual report. Caption reads: “Sauganash tenants build recreation quarters.”

One thing which appears in every account on the Airport Homes from the CHA, the newspaper articles depicting it, to even the Bradford and Hirsch’s retelling of events, is that the surrounding community of the project was of working class, white, homeowners. While Bradford and Hirsch make only brief mentions of the role of private property, it seems to be a key factor in not only the nature of resistance sections of a community take towards integration, but the attitudes of whites themselves. For his part, Hirsch does offer a breakdown on how homeownership may have influenced white backlash, especially among foreign born white communities who he identifies as having lived in place longer and having higher ownership rates than native whites. Where Hirsch implies that it is the broken-down insulation of these grounded ethnic white communities which caused their racist backlash, he misses a broader trend.<sup>46</sup> Though ethnic white community ties and resistance to racial succession undoubtedly played an

---

<sup>46</sup> Hirsch, *Making the Second Ghetto*, 190-195.

important role, this paper finds one of the most common denominators between instances of race riot in this period is higher than average rate of home ownership full stop.

One source Hirsch introduces to the conversation is a 1939 survey by the Chicago Planning Commission which recorded home ownership information in Chicago by race and ethnicity. Hirsch correctly observes that homeownership rates in West Lawn (Airport Homes) were high at 46% and he attributes this to the presence of ethnic whites who have much higher homeownership rates than native whites. Hirsch asserts the insular staying presence of these communities also contributed to their resistance towards black intrusion. What Hirsch misses, however, is that average homeownership in Chicago calculated across all ethnic groups stood at 38%. 46% of owner occupation is high regardless of ethnicity and where Hirsch uses the information to suggest a deeper/more personal culturally grounded reasons for exclusion, other sources point towards the prominence protective property interest played altogether.<sup>47</sup>

Another source indicating the importance that property values and insecurity about neighborhood conditions comes from a report by the Chicago Committee on Human Relations. The report is a retrospective on the period from 1947 to 1951 and, in service to the city council, analytically unpacks recent racial tensions seen in events such as the Airport Homes and other race riots. When discussing white communities' resistance to integration private property and belief regarding deteriorating community conditions immediately becomes a prominent factor. The report identifies that many whites outside of public housing refused to live in communities where nonwhites were moving and, in attempting to maintain homogeneity, mobilized Property Improvement Associations to accomplish their goals. When this failed, as the report identifies, white flight occurred in masse as the general pattern and belief had been, when nonwhites move

---

<sup>47</sup> Hirsch, *Making the Second Ghetto*, 190-195.



into a community it tended to go downhill and its governmental "...services tend to lose efficiency." The belief that black migration could be so detrimentally impactful to private property owners home values was so strong that the report spends a section attempting to dispel it. The report identifies that under maintenance, overuse, and rezoning were the primary culprits of property deterioration and felt the specific need to elaborate, "The color of the skin of the occupant has nothing to do with it."<sup>48</sup> While the report doesn't specifically articulate that it is the system of private property and racist beliefs which were catalyzing exclusion, its denouncements and presentation suggest this was the case for communities surrounding integration efforts.

When describing their motivations these communities do not often make the appeal to maintaining the neighborhood as entirely their ethnicity, in fact many were comprised of numerous different white ethnicities. Instead, they often speak of their rights as property owners first and their supposed right to choose their neighbors secondarily. The undeniable emphasis in these communities was not on racial or ethnic succession in general, but of blacks in particular due to the perceived threats they posed to whites who disproportionately had grounded financial stakes in the city.<sup>49</sup> Even in Hirsch's work it is revealed that these ethnic white enclaves are mixed between Italians, Poles, and other ethnicities with varying majorities, but only see violence once black residents move in.<sup>50</sup> As Freund presents in his work, during this period blacks were seen as a potential source of community blight and turmoil because of racist beliefs about their character and the state of their poor living conditions within overcrowded urban ghettos. Without understanding the systems which put black citizens in dilapidated living conditions, and the systems which helped advantage whites, the belief was that black people

---

<sup>48</sup> The Chicago Commission on Human Relations, Chicago, IL, 1952, *The People of Chicago Five Year Report 1947-1951 of the Chicago Commission on Human Relations*, Chicago History Museum 45-49.

<sup>49</sup> Chicago Housing Authority, *Annual Report 1947*, 19-21.

<sup>50</sup> Hirsch, "Massive Resistance," 522-550.

themselves created poor neighborhoods because they were poor neighbors.<sup>51</sup> In the case of Detroit, Freund finds evidence of the property owner specific backlash in appeals to courts and pushes for zoning changes which would bar low-income blacks from being able to find residences in suburban single family style neighborhoods.<sup>52</sup> One sign of the same property owner, economically argued, backlash in Chicago comes from another community of predominately white homeowners facing the integration of their own temporary project: Edison Park.

In response to the CHA attempts to build veteran housing in their neighborhood, citizens of Edison Park filed an injunction against the CHA, the city, and the Board of Education to prevent any construction of integrated units within their territory. Their stated grievances were that it would lower property values, pose a fire and safety hazard, violate zoning ordinances preventing low-income style units, and breach racially restrictive covenants within the community. The judge presiding over the case ended up ruling against the citizens of Edison Park on grounds that zoning codes didn't apply to the temporary projects according to ordinances passed by the city council and that restrictive covenants could not apply to the Board of Education on whose land the projects were to be built on.<sup>53</sup> Though the case was lost, the arguments presented at Edison Park provide critical insight into how property owning whites in neighborhoods surrounding integrated public housing saw their position increasingly threatened by it and began arguing against it with market imperative theories as understood in the work of Freund. Essentially, black exclusion, due to racist beliefs, was imperative for maintaining the stability of white neighborhoods and property values in the housing market.<sup>54</sup>

---

<sup>51</sup> Freund, *Colored Property*, 1-20.

<sup>52</sup> Freund, *Colored Property*, 285-327.

<sup>53</sup> Chicago Housing Authority, *Annual Report 1947*, 22.

<sup>54</sup> Freund, *Colored Property*, 45-46.

With some room for speculation, evidence suggests that whites inside public housing, as seen in the CHAs annual report, seemed surprisingly more amiable to the idea of integration than whites outside of it. How to explain the case of the Airport Homes veteran squatters? Simple, many of the white veterans were presumably from the community the projects were placed in and felt frustrated with delays and likely betrayed by the fact outside black vets would be given priority over them. This can be seen in the argument that local white vets should be prioritized made by many of the agitators throughout the Airport Homes incident. Veteran projects, because of the constraints placed upon the CHA of cheap land acquisition, were only able to be located in 10 of Chicago's 50 wards. Most veterans then, black or white, were outsiders to the communities they migrated to and had no stake of private interest to lose.<sup>55</sup> With the CHA's delay in constructing livable projects along with there being far fewer units available than there were veterans in need, tensions among local prospective tenants and the CHA were high. This line of thought is further supported through the event of another horrific race riot months after the incidents at the Airport Homes.

In 1947 an even larger race riot led by whites in reaction to an integrated veteran project occurred at the Fernwood homes. Exploding in the span of four days, the CHA had coordinated with the mayor to ensure 30 police officers were present when black veterans initially moved into the project on a Thursday, then stepped up to 200 on Friday, then finally 1000 on both Saturday and Sunday. The violence of this white crowd was especially severe as thousands gathered in a field and tried to storm the Fernwood housing project to forcibly remove the black veterans. The police successfully repulsed the attack with four injuries from thrown stones. After being repulsed the crowd turned on a major roadway and began assaulting passing black drivers

---

<sup>55</sup> Chicago Housing Authority, *Annual Report 1947*, 22-23.

resulting in 50 hospitalizations.<sup>56</sup> Elements of white supremacy and a vitriolic hate towards the black residents was clearly present, but again particular agitating factors catalyzed specific white reactions.

Despite the overwhelming backlash of whites toward the integrated projects, there was still a remarkably open sentiment inside the Fernwood Homes themselves. Until the violence broke out, unlike in the case of the Airport Homes, no resistance to integration by white veterans was reported. When a tenant council of the white veterans met in April 1947, there were incredibly heated discussions on what to do with the 8 black families. The meeting was called in response to the white violence which was seen by residents as largely external. Though roughly half of the veterans were willing to push for the eviction of the family, the arguments by the other half were so tense that no true consensus could be reached. In addition to this, while a vote barring black families from admittance into the council passed, one only allowing Caucasian membership failed. Those who spoke out in favor of the black families were shouted down by others as “communists.”<sup>57</sup> At the end of the day the council couldn’t come to a consensus leaving the fate of the black families to others, but their argument itself revealed how unbothered a near majority of whites in public housing were to the idea of integration, even in a community sieging the project.

Popular speculation over the causes of the riot also quickly pointed to the role the real estate industry played in potentially exasperating matters. In a *Defender* article, there was an outcry between a perceived real estate trust which was believed to be agitating and organizing groups to maintain white hegemony.<sup>58</sup> This speculation and suspicion of real estate interests,

---

<sup>56</sup> “Arrest 217 In Housing Fight,” *The Chicago Defender*, August 23, 1947.

<sup>57</sup> “Fernwood Vets Debate Race,” *The Chicago Defender*, April 10, 1948.

<sup>58</sup> “Spotlight on the Real Estate Trust,” *The Chicago Defender*, September 6, 1947.

along with the role of property owners, was also present in the Airport Homes riot with even the Tribune, which was traditionally anti-public housing, commenting on it. When reporting on the CHA's decision to maintain its black residents at the Airport Homes the Tribune comments it was done, "...despite the objections of white property owners in the neighborhood."<sup>59</sup> This repeating reference to property interests, specifically among whites, seems to further suggest it as a primary catalyst of racial violence during the period.

A closer examination of the veteran projects provides clear complications to any dismissal of positive race relations occurring within public housing as it seems important insight into racial conflict can be gained. Though certain individuals were undoubtedly motivated by overtly white superiority ideology and others altruistically integrationist, certain factors seem to correlate with certain attitudes. For the whites inside of projects, they were in a unique environment where a new social atmosphere of uplift and community engagement/reform was being experimented with by the progressive leadership of the CHA. For whites in neighborhoods surrounding projects they were often staying members of their community with often deep insecurities regarding the housing shortage, the state of Chicago's slums, and maintaining their private property interest. Though these statements are generalizations of groups who had great exceptions, with white being overtly racist or pro-integration on both sides, another moment of violence seems to further suggest important differences.

In the first week of August, 1953, the Trumbull Housing Project on the fringe of Chicago's Southside prepared to welcome in a new family: the Howards. Donald and Betty Howard were the parents of Donald Howard Jr. and Cynthia Howard. The Howards, like many other families in Chicago at the time, struggled to find affordable housing amid the shortage.

---

<sup>59</sup> "Eight Injured in New Violence at CHA Project," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, December 7, 1946.

When Betty applied for housing assistance through the CHA and then received the news her family could move into the Trumbull project, it must have been relieving. One problem which the CHA hadn't anticipated, however, was that though Betty appeared white, she and the entire Howard family were black.<sup>60</sup>

Constructed in 1938 as part of the initial PWA public housing project efforts, the Trumbull Park housing project adhered to the neighborhood composition rule. When residents were welcomed into the project they were as white as the South Deering neighborhood that surrounded them.<sup>61</sup> The South Deering neighborhood involved itself heavily in the projects planning and construction with a development interest group, the South Deering Improvement Association (SDIA), being a key presence at community engagement meetings and actively recruiting more members from the community. Attitudes were positive toward the project as residents of the neighborhood felt they were finally getting developmental attention.<sup>62</sup>

Over the course of the 1940s little controversy surrounded the Lilly white housing project. When rumors of integration of the Trumbull project circulated in 1940, the neighborhood of South Deering grew tense and the SDIA sought reassurances for Trumbull's continued racial exclusivity. The CHA responded with a promise to not change the racial makeup of Trumbull and, even through the integration of the Airport Homes and Fernwood, they kept that promise. The hypocrisy of this stance, however, grew more and more untenable as increasing statements by the CHA held that they would uphold the ideals of non-discrimination, state law outlawed discriminatory practices the CHA was engaged in, and CHA resolutions upheld integrationist

---

<sup>60</sup> Hirsch "Massive Resistance in the Urban North," 522–550.

<sup>61</sup> "2000 Families Leave Marks on U.S. Houses," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, June 6, 1938.

<sup>62</sup> "Meeting Called to Explain U.S. Housing Delay Trumbull Park Plan Changes Blamed," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, February 2, 1936.

sentiments.<sup>63</sup> When the Howards slipped under the CHAs informal efforts to keep its promise in 1953, the stage for another race riot was set.

Unusual for this setup, when the Howards first moved in, the *Defender* reporters who interviewed the family claim that they were welcomed by other residents of the housing project. An article by the *Defender* details how when the Howards moved in, their neighbors' kids helped them move their things. It also details those kids throughout the all-white housing project quickly accepted Donald Jr. and Cynthia as playmates, and the parents didn't stop them. Donald Sr. even chatted with other Trumbull Park adult residents and detected no resentment. Here is the paradox: the whites on the frontline of this all-white housing projects integration had no overwhelmingly negative response upon meeting the Howards.<sup>64</sup> Indeed, some may have harbored ill will towards them, but they didn't show it on the first day of their move in. They didn't show it like the rest of the South Deering community over the next four years.

On August 5, 1953, the South Deering community exploded with racial tension. Starting with teenagers throwing rocks and stones at the Howards apartment, racist hostility began against them. By August 9, groups of 1,000 to 2,000 whites began besieging the project, throwing stones, shouting racial slurs, harassing its residents, and battling with the police that came to ostensibly stop an all-out race war. In response to the violence the Howard family had to board up their windows and often had to hide their children in the closet to shield them from any potential thrown objects. By August 11, 750 police officers surrounded the housing project and attempted to ease the mob.<sup>65</sup>

---

<sup>63</sup> Hirsch "Massive Resistance in the Urban North," 522–550.

<sup>64</sup> Palmer, "Family Prisoner of Mob Two Weeks," *The Chicago Defender*, August 22, 1953.

<sup>65</sup> Palmer, "Family Prisoner of Mob Two Weeks," *Defender*.

On August 12 the CHA made a statement warning that any residents of the Trumbull Park Project who were convicted in relation to the race riot would be evicted. This proclamation does show that not all was racially harmonious within the project itself, but a spokesman of the CHA later stated he believed only two, if not more, families would be affected by the decision.<sup>66</sup> At any rate, the hatred and violence from the surrounding community was real and it was leveled against the project.

One of the only definitive historical accounts on the Trumbull Park race riots comes from historian Arnold Hirsch. In his account there is not appearance of the defender articles detailing how positive race relations were inside of the project. The emphasis is decidedly on a collective white racism leveled against the Howards and any other black families which moved into the project. Hirsch briefly mentions in one article how there were pleasant conversations exchanged in communal spaces like the laundry room but is quick to dismiss them on account of their disappearance in public. In this he makes mention of how some whites tied white cloths on their homes doors as a signifier to outsiders they were not the targets.<sup>67</sup> What Hirsch misses in this emphasis/analysis, however, is that whites inside public housing were not the same as those outside of it. Their motivations, attitudes, and accounts were markedly different than the whites of the surrounding community, even if they were pressured into maintaining the color line, and they reveal complications to white identity and motivations for exclusion.

As was the case in other attempts at integration, the surrounding community of the Trumbull Housing Project was deeply invested in maintaining the perceived real estate value, norms, and character of their neighborhood. Racist beliefs that integration would only lead to Black succession, lowered property values, increases in crime and threaten the established

---

<sup>66</sup> "CHA Tenants in Mob Face Loss of Home," *The Chicago Defender*, August 22, 1953.

<sup>67</sup> Hirsch "Massive Resistance in the Urban North," 522–550.



community were likely primary motivators which, while absent for the residents of the housing project, were in abundance in South Deering. This line of thought is further supported by the fact the SDIA was firmly against integration and its members were among the most outspoken in the community. The dichotomy between those in the project and those outside was so recognized that the *Defender* felt comfortable stating "... the neighbors of the nonwhite residents in the project are friendly and outsiders alone are carrying on what could be construed as a planned action of hoodlumism."<sup>68</sup>

Arrest records provide another indication of a disproportionate response of the surrounding community to the newly integrated Trumbull Park project. Using reports published by the *Defender* and *Tribune*, which state the names and addresses of those arrested in the Trumbull Park Riot, along with maps of the neighborhood from the 1950 census, it is possible to decipher exactly who the most violent and combative rioters were. The result of this study is that despite the threat of being evicted, 6 people whose addresses were within the Trumbull Park Project area were arrested. While certainly indicating that some in the project were opposed to integration, this number is surpassed by the 26 other recorded arrests in people outside the project. In addition to these arrests are another 20 of juveniles whose names and addresses were never recorded.<sup>69</sup> While the proportion of residents resisting integration compared to the proportion of people in the surrounding community doing the same remains a question, it is clear that in sheer number, members of the neighborhood around the project were coming into greater conflict with the police presence protecting the Howards.

---

<sup>68</sup> Hugh Gardner, "Peg Leg Bates Real Symbol Of His Race And Its Effort To Climb Under Handicaps," *The Chicago Defender*, April 17, 1954.

<sup>69</sup> See Chicago Tribune, "Chicago Daily Tribune (1923-1963)," (Chicago, Proquest). and The Chicago Defender, "The Chicago Defender (National Coverage) (1921-1967)," (Chicago, Proquest). and "1950 Census Enumeration District Map 103-1," National Archives and Records Administration, accessed July 19, 2024, <https://1950census.archives.gov/search/?county=Chicago%2C+Cook&page=1&state=IL#>.

### **The Unique Case of Cabrini Green**

The Francis Cabrini Green homes were constructed in 1942 in one of Chicago's most infamous slums located on the near north side nicknamed "Little Hell." What is unique about the Francis Cabrini project is found in many commentaries from residents who lived in the project during the 1940s and even up to the 1950s. With unabashed enthusiasm they recount their time at Cabrini as a positive experience and one which featured incredibly pleasant racial relations between all. In a city that was plagued by the aforementioned accounts of segregationist racism, Cabrini and the community surrounding it stood as a stark example of an inclusive community of whites, blacks, Asians, and many other races.

One of the most compelling accounts on the racial atmosphere of Cabrini comes from interviews with its own residents conducted in the 2003 work *When Public Housing was Paradise* by J.S. Fuerst and D. Bradford Hunt. J.S. Fuerst actually served as the Director of Research and Statistics for the CHA in a period from 1946 to 1953. With his previous knowledge of the CHA and its operations he set out to counteract some of the more negative narratives surrounding public housing which had developed in the later part of the twentieth century. To do so, in collaboration with historian Hunt, they recorded numerous oral histories from previous residents commenting on their experiences in public housing.<sup>70</sup> Though these interviews should be viewed with some skepticism of romanticized reflections, they offer incredible challenges to the understanding of whites in public housing being racially exclusive. In no other accounts is this more prevalent than in those regarding Cabrini Green.

One of the most striking reflections on race relations in Cabrini comes from a white woman who lived there with her family from 1943 to 1953, Angela Willuweit. "We were all one

---

<sup>70</sup> Fuerst, *When Public Housing was Paradise*, 1-7.

big family: black and white, Mexican and Japanese, German, Irish, Polish, Italian-you name it,” she stated. In the interview Angela recounts how she lived just a floor above a black family and says nobody thought anything of it. Jewish people lived near them and there were no comments of antisemitism, Mexican resident lived on their same floor, and she even talks about how a Japanese man helped her husband fix up their car one summer.<sup>71</sup> This account is in clear contrast to the racial conflict happening around many of the other integrated public housing projects across the city.

Supporting some of Willuweit’s assertions are some candid photos in the CHA annual reports. In a 1957 report detailing CHA operations for the year, photos appear depicting groups of black, white, and Asian Cabrini Residents mingling attending events around the project/community (See Figures 1 and 2).<sup>72</sup> Though the CHA was deeply invested in its image, these photos seem remarkably genuine as it is in line with the oral histories. Even after the violent race riots of the 1940s and 50s then, race relations were incredibly open in Chicago public housing further betraying the influence private property may have in catalyzing violence and defensiveness.

Even before the construction of the Cabrini Green Homes, the Near Northside section of Chicago was an unusually diverse section of the city. Accounts place poor Irish immigrants as the first residents of the section, eventual supplanted by Germans, Swedes, some Jewish people, and then finally the largest demographic leading up to Cabrini’s construction: Italians. There even existed a sizable black population in Little Hell, but it is important to note this is largely because the land was in an industrially waste polluted area where no other group had any

---

<sup>71</sup> Fuerst, *When Public Housing was Paradise*, 119-120.

<sup>72</sup> Chicago Housing Authority, Chicago, IL, 1957, *Annual Report 1957*, Chicago History Museum, 6.

inclination or need to move into. The work opportunity and need provided by local industry and bursting seems



**Figure 1** – Image appearing on page 6 of 1957 CHA Annual Report. Caption reads: “The whole neighborhood turned out for dedication ceremonies when Lower North Center opened the new community building at Frances Cabrini Homes.”



**Figure 2** – Image appearing on page 6 of 1957 CHA Annual Report. Caption reads: “Everyone’s ready to help with refreshments for a party for teen-agers at Lower North Center.”

of the black belt left the area open for black settlement, rather than any true integrationist sentiment.<sup>73</sup>

An argument could be made that the interracial residential makeup of the northside discredits the assertion that private real estate and the economic imperative rationality was the growing animus for continued segregation and white racism, but a few key points challenge this line of thought. Firstly, the real estate occupied by black residents of the Near Northside wasn't desirable to white groups. Secondly, black residents did try to expand out of their undesirable territory and their willingness to pay more for housing, because of severe shortages and crowding conditions, did end up bringing them into conflict with whites.<sup>74</sup> What happened in Cabrini was not reflected throughout the community in general but was seemingly peculiar to the residents who inhabited it.

### **The Issue of Maintaining Whites in Chicago Public Housing**

Whites in public housing ranged in their identity from veterans, elderly, to the working-class poor, but even in these decades they were slightly set apart from other groups in low-income housing due to certain racial advantages. Over the course of the 1940s and 1950s poor whites' economic situation in Chicago generally improved more than the situation of blacks. In 1940, roughly 2100 of the CHAs tenants were white and only around 200 were non-white. The white majority, however, was quickly surpassed as by 1946 just above 3,000 residents were white and roughly 4,300 were non-white.<sup>75</sup> In a 1950 report by the CHA the disproportionate housing needs of black people was identified as they accounted half of the city's projected

---

<sup>73</sup> Ben Austen, *High-Risers: Cabrini-Green and the Fate of American Public Housing*, (New York, NY: Harper, 2019), 3-23.

<sup>74</sup> Hirsch, *Making the Second Ghetto*, 44.

<sup>75</sup> Chicago Housing Authority, Chicago, IL, 1952, *Annual Report 1952*, Chicago History Museum, 16.

housing need while only making up an eighth of its population.<sup>76</sup> Systemic economic inequality combined with some other CHA policies toward slum clearance did lead to a rapidly dwindling population of whites in CHA housing. In addition to this, a deep concern of the CHA, identified by later historians, was a perceived racial tipping point where whites would refuse to live in certain projects where they became a minority.<sup>77</sup> This section is dedicated towards understanding this demographic transition in public housing and finds that, while site location became deeply racist on an institutional level, the increasing black population in public housing and failure of integration was not primarily due to the influence of these policies, but the bettering situation of white public housing residents themselves.

One of the more interesting ways to gauge the number of whites in public housing diminishing is by viewing the images in the CHA's annual reports to the mayor and city council. Many of these reports, dating from 1940 to the 2000s, contain idealized images of public housing residents or projects themselves to demonstrate certain goals or conditions. In the reports of the 1940s a majority of the images are of white families, typically unbroken, engaged in what appears to be very meaningful work, socializing, or fun activities. In the 1950s a majority of the images depict white families again under the same conditions, with a few notable exceptions depicting black families or even positive interracial interaction. In the reports from the 1960s to the 1980s, however, almost the entirety of the photos presented to the city council are of black residents who are presented positively but also as in the most need.<sup>78</sup> These images indicate not only the shifting ideals of the CHA but the fact that white families were largely disappearing from the CHAs most notable projects.

---

<sup>76</sup> Chicago Housing Authority, Chicago, IL, 1950, *Annual Report 1950*, Chicago History Museum, pg. 2.

<sup>77</sup> BRadfor

<sup>78</sup> Annual Report Archive 1940-1990. (Working on Citation)

One of the primary factors behind whites' ability to leave public housing was their general economic success and the federal government's massive subsidization of private housing through mortgage insurance. As detailed in the works of Katznelson and Freund, during the mid-twentieth century white citizens, across ethnicities, found themselves with a governmentally backed advantage over black citizens. As is found in Katznelson's and many other works, the Federal Housing Authority (FHA) denied countless black residents of Chicago and across the U.S. the ability to purchase their own homes through redlining, racist economic policy, localized control, and overt discrimination. This was done at the same time countless whites, regardless of ethnicity, were able for the first time to access affordable, governmentally insured, mortgages which were used to purchase homes that subsequently appreciated in value far faster than any comparable black assets.<sup>79</sup>

Annual reports from the CHA tracked some of the white exodus without ever recognizing its larger impacts on the demographics on their housing. In nearly every report the CHA dedicates sections to the topic of tenants moving out of its housing due to their incomes passing the threshold of what would qualify them for housing assistance. An important turning point in this came in 1948 when congress officially ended a moratorium on eviction of over income families meant to protect war workers who had been housed in public housing. As is seen in a 1952 report by the CHA, this led to a steady increase in the eviction of over income families with 1,680 tenants being classified as over income.<sup>80</sup> Indications from the stagnating demographics of the white population in CHA housing in the report and increasing black population exhibit a

---

<sup>79</sup> Ira Katznelson, *When Affirmative Action Was White: An Untold History of Racial Inequality in Twentieth-Century America*, (New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 2023), 5-42.

<sup>80</sup> Chicago Housing Authority, *Annual Report 1952*, 22.

white exodus and lack of demand due to these economic factors and other opportunities emerging in the private market.<sup>81</sup>

Reports in the Chicago Tribune indicate that there were growing suburban markets around Chicago white residents were flocking to in the late 1940s. In one report by the *Tribune*, a boom of suburban development was identified in Southwest Chicago. This boom was attributed to increased demand from whites who were fleeing from the migration of black residents into their neighborhoods. Also important was the continued improvement of the economic situation of whites and their access to federally insured mortgages.<sup>82</sup> This new housing boom in the suburbs was disproportionately available to whites and shows the improving and growing housing market situation former whites in public housing could enter.

Another factor which doesn't get considered in a lot of other works on the concentration of black poverty in public housing is the CHA's overemphasis on housing black residents indirectly through their own policies. One main contention exists between the work of Hirsch and a newer study by Bradford on the racial factors behind the surge in black residents. Hirsch contends that the overall failure of public housing was due to orchestrated racist efforts by institutions which concentrated it in predominately black areas of the city and white backlash toward integrative efforts. Bradford's work, *Blueprint for Disaster*, challenges Hirsch's assumption by emphasizing that, racism aside, the original goal of the CHA was to provide housing to those who needed it most and to eliminate slums through providing housing to displaced residents of urban renewal clearance projects.<sup>83</sup> To Bradford, opposed to Hirsch, the concentration of public housing with black people in black areas was inevitable even without

---

<sup>81</sup> Chicago Housing Authority, *Annual Report 1952*, 16.

<sup>82</sup> Harry Adams, "Survey Finds Housing Boom to Continue," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, October 23, 1949.

<sup>83</sup> Hunt, *Blueprint for Disaster*, 1-13.



institutionalized racial motivations because they set out to replace and improve what already were predominately black neighborhoods. While Hirsch's commentary on racist attitudes shaping the demographics of public housing is largely accurate, Bradfords contention finds firm grounding in source material and helps explain why black residents came to dominate CHA housing.

In annual reports of the CHA since the 1940s, black citizens of Chicago were routinely cited as the most in need of housing assistance. In addition to this increased need was black residents' overrepresentation in the slum communities targeted for clearance and renewal in the 1950s. In a 1952 report by the CHA, it was identified that 80% of 8,200 families living on sites to be cleared for CHA housing were black. In the report it is stated that these families, because of their relocation, were given priority over others in admittance to CHA homes. This compounded with a backlog of 15,000 other black families trying to apply for CHA housing presents the dubious situation of the CHA coming to house a disproportionate number of black residents who were experiencing more economic hardship and poorer living conditions in the private market than whites.<sup>84</sup>

Towards the beginning of the 1960s, this tenant selection policy not only affected the number of black residents being admitted into CHA housing over the years, but also deeply impacted the types of white residents who had priority access to CHA housing. Even with the destruction of the temporary veteran housing by the early 1950s, the CHA still maintained their priority access to permanent housing projects due to their precarious situation. The CHA acknowledged the veteran need for housing remained so great that they were unable to admit other applicants on waiting lists. In 1952, only half of the 250 veteran families from

---

<sup>84</sup> Chicago Housing Authority, *Annual Report 1952*, 16.

decommissioned projects were moved into the private housing market.<sup>85</sup> Elderly whites were also another non-contested group which enjoyed and needed access to affordable housing. In fact, even while the majority of public housing residents became black, throughout the twentieth century whites have made up a sizeable portion of the CHA elderly housing program. In 1974, though whites only comprised 17% of CHA housing, they made up 44% of the CHAs elderly housing program.<sup>86</sup> This continued representation, while ostensibly due to need, is attributed to the uncontroversial nature of elderly housing and its systems prioritizing local population.

### **Conclusion**

In 1954 famous black football player Buddy Young came to Trumbull Park with his brothers Clarence and Hendrick to get some practice in before heading off to a training camp. Clarence lived in the Trumbull Park housing project, and despite the turmoil in their community, they set out with a ball to play their game. When they got to the park other black residents of the project had already gathered there playing a softball game, but with them was a police presence of what Young estimated to be about a “thousand cops.” The cops were holding back a mob of whites led by an outspoken white ethnic woman who spoke broken English. Quoted in the *Defender* the women cried out to the men, “Vy do you vant to play ere? Vy don’t you go to Washington park with all the other n----s?” implying Trumbull park, as well as the surrounding community, rightfully belonged to the whites. Her statement was a statement of possession: this neighborhood, these houses, this park was for white people and having blacks there could not be tolerated. Several officers approached Young as the crowd grew and became more unruly, one threatened to arrest him if he didn’t leave, but was overruled by the police captain present at the time. The captain simply retorted that if they stayed, the police couldn’t guarantee Youngs safety

---

<sup>85</sup> Chicago Housing Authority, *Annual Report 1952*, 27.

<sup>86</sup> Chicago Housing Authority, *Annual Report 1974-1975*, 14-17.

from the mob. Begrudgingly, Young and the rest of the black men present left back to the Trumbull Homes where, despite being the flashpoint of tension, they were safer in than the surrounding community.

The projects of the CHA were incredibly unique environments and catalysts of racial interaction, community building, social reform, and welfare efforts across Chicago. The white experience in the CHA projects complicates many of the traditional assumptions about the general white experience from 1940 to 1960. Far from the picket fences of suburbia, poor but rising, CHA residents often had more in common with each other than they did with outsiders. This is seen in the sentiments among ethnic whites of an emerging comradeship which in many ways seemed unique to public housing. It is also seen in the surprising openness of residents towards black integration. Amid the most violent race riots Chicago had ever seen, white residents on the frontlines of the CHAs initial integration efforts seemed more accommodating than others for many reasons, but their uniquely created space was chief among them. Despite the CHAs later controversies, despite the rapid decline in white residents after the 1960s, from 1940 to 1960 white experience in Chicago public housing helps complicate, challenge, and progress our ideas regarding whiteness and racism then and now.

## Bibliography (Primary Sources)

### Newspaper Articles

- Adams, Harry. "Survey Finds Housing Boom to Continue." *Chicago Daily Tribune*. October 23, 1949. Pg. SW1.
- "Arrest 217 In Housing Fight." *The Chicago Defender*. August 23, 1947. Pg. 1.
- "CHA Tenants in Mob Face Loss of Home." *The Chicago Defender*. August 22, 1953. Pg. 4.
- "Eight Injured in New Violence at CHA Project." *Chicago Daily Tribune*. December 7, 1946. Pg. 24.
- "Fernwood Vets Debate Race." *The Chicago Defender*. April 10, 1948. Pg. 19.
- "Housing Projects Give 85 Vets Chicago Homes." *The Chicago Defender*. December 28, 1946. Pg. 5.
- "It Happens in Chicago." *The Chicago Defender*. December 14, 1946. Pg. 14.
- "Mayor Assures Vet Protection Hits Race Violence in Chicago Housing." *The Chicago Defender*. November 30, 1946. Pg. 5.
- "Meeting Called to Explain U.S. Housing Delay Trumbull Park Plan Changes Blamed." *The Chicago Tribune*. February 2, 1936. Pg. SW1.
- Palmer, L. F. Jr. "Family Prisoner of Mob Two Weeks," *The Chicago Defender*. August 22, 1953. Pg. 4.
- "Spotlight on the Real Estate Trust." *The Chicago Defender*. September 6, 1947. Pg. 14.
- "Voice of the People: Squatters Were Useful." *Chicago Daily Tribune*. November 22, 1946. Pg. 18.
- "2000 Families Leave Marks on U.S. Houses." *Chicago Daily Tribune*. June 6, 1938. Pg. 1.

### CHA Annual Reports

Chicago Housing Authority. Chicago, IL, 1947. *Annual Report 1947*. Chicago History Museum.

Chicago Housing Authority. Chicago, IL, 1950. *Annual Report 1950*. Chicago History Museum.

Chicago Housing Authority. Chicago, IL, 1952. *Annual Report 1952*. Chicago History Museum.

Chicago Housing Authority. Chicago, IL, 1954. *Annual Report 1954*. Chicago History Museum.

Chicago Housing Authority. Chicago, IL, 1947. *Annual Report 1957*. Chicago History Museum.

Chicago Housing Authority. Chicago, IL, 1975. *Annual Report 1974-1975*. Chicago History Museum.

The Chicago Commission on Human Relations. Chicago, IL, 1952. *The People of Chicago Five Year Report 1947-1951 of the Chicago Commission on Human Relations*. Chicago History Museum.

“1950 Census Enumeration District Map 103-1.” National Archives and Records Administration.

Accessed July 19, 2024.

<https://1950census.archives.gov/search/?county=Chicago%2C+Cook&page=1&state=I>

#.

### Oral History Interviews

Fuerst, J. S. and D. Bradford Hunt. *When Public Housing Was Paradise: Building Community in Chicago*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2005.

## Bibliography (Secondary Sources)

### Books

- Bowley, Devereux. *The Poorhouse: Subsidized Housing in Chicago*. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2012.
- Freund, David M. P. *Colored Property: State Policy and White Racial Politics in Suburban America*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2007.
- Hirsch, Arnold R. *Making the Second Ghetto: Race and Housing in Chicago, 1940-1960*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2021.
- Hunt, D. Bradford. *Blueprint for Disaster: The Unraveling of Chicago Public Housing*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2010.
- Katznelson, Ira. *When Affirmative Action was White: An Untold History of Racial Inequality in Twentieth-Century America*. New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 2023.
- Self, Robert O. *American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Postwar Oakland*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003.
- Sugrue, Thomas J. *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014.

### Articles

- Hirsch, Arnold R. "Massive Resistance in the Urban North: Trumbull Park, Chicago, 1953-1966." *The Journal of American History* 82, no. 2 (1995): 522-50.  
<https://doi.org/10.2307/2082185>
- Hunt, D. Bradford. "What Went Wrong with Public Housing in Chicago? A History of the Robert Taylor Homes." *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* (1998-) 94, no. 1 (2001): 96-123.

### Websites

The Chicago Housing Authority. "About." The Chicago Housing Authority. Accessed March 7, 2024.

<https://www.thecha.org/about#:~:text=After%20the%201965%20landmark%20court,w20lifted%20in%20May%202010>.

Martens, Betsey, Elizabeth Glenn, and Tiffany Mangum. "Race, Equity and Housing: The Early Years." The National Association of Housing and Redevelopment Officials (NAHRO), February 1, 2021. [https://www.nahro.org/journal\\_article/race-equity-and-housing-the-early-years/](https://www.nahro.org/journal_article/race-equity-and-housing-the-early-years/).