

Segregated Housing: Martin Luther King to Cabrini Green

By Katherine Gonsalves

In Chicago, the city skyline is undergoing a dramatic metamorphosis. Construction of luxury buildings, such as the Trump International Hotel and Residence, is underway, even as segregated public housing towers—such as the notorious Cabrini-Green housing projects—are being demolished. The contrast cannot be overstated.

The Trump skyscrapers with their cutting-edge architecture, five bedroom penthouses, stunning river views, and 14th floor spa are a symbol of luxury and affluence attracting outside investment to the city. Across the Chicago River, the Cabrini-Green towers, built in 1943, with their high murder rate and some of the nation's most concentrated gang activity, are a dark stain on Chicago's public image. Frightened residents live as captives in their homes. The buildings (with boarded up windows, broken elevators, graffiti, and a trash shoot that at times is backed up to the 14th floor) are encased in steel fencing to prevent residents from being thrown off.

Only One Way Out

A *New York Times* story from 2007 highlighted the relief and regret felt by some of Cabrini-Green's residents.¹ Commenting on the drug users and decaying conditions of the buildings, Sierra Milton, one of the last remaining residents on the 14th floor, said, "I want to be out of here so bad, I want to go because I'm scared. I've been living here since 1998 and this is the worst I ever felt."

One floor above, Thelma Hicks expressed some sadness about the pending move, saying, "If I had a choice, I'd stay here because this is my roots."

Working class communities and people of color have been facing the same dilemma for decades under urban renewal—put up with substandard conditions, or pack up and leave their communities. Investment in improvements does not occur until former residents have relocated and the land sold to redevelopment agencies for hefty profits. Savvy civic leaders

have long realized that tearing down a building is far easier than dismantling entrenched racial bias and poverty. Consequently, years go by and little is done to address the roots of urban inequality.

Not all leaders, however, have turned a blind eye to the problems contributing to the perpetuation of the modern-day American ghetto. On January 26, 1966, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. moved into a run-down ghetto apartment in Chicago's West Side to politicize the issue of fair housing. The segregated neighborhoods provided a fertile ground for King and other activists to launch a national campaign to confront the fierce inequality of America's inner cities. Like the Cabrini-Green projects of present day, King's neighborhood was typical of the North Lawndale district of Chicago. Referred to as "slumdale" by its residents, it was known for its rotting infrastructure, chipping paint, rodent infestation, and lack of heating.²

From *de Jure* to *de Facto*

King may have begun the battle for ending *de jure* segregation in housing, but the widespread practices of red-lining, urban renewal, restrictive covenants, biased mortgage lending, disinvestment, and white flight have ensured that the housing patterns established under slavery and Jim Crow remain firmly intact.³ Many of the housing conditions that King fought against are still faced by Black families in Chicago, New York, Philadelphia, Detroit, Baltimore, Los Angeles, and Oakland.⁴

During the Second World War, waves of Black migrants flowed into Chicago seeking jobs, freedom, and a better life, only to find that the city lacked



affordable housing and shelter for people of color. Because whites were unwilling to allow Blacks into their neighborhoods, Black renters were forced to live in overpriced, overcrowded, rodent-infested “fire traps” owned by absentee slumlords who made huge profits.⁵ Those who attempted to escape the squalor by moving outside racially bounded districts had their homes burned down and their families tortured. Others were murdered by rioting mobs of white people. These acts were not just the work of individual racists. Legislation played a major role in shifting tax revenue away from the inner city to the white suburbs. Later, under urban renewal, the city tore down more Black housing than it created, thus ensuring that the projects and ghettos remained in highly segregated areas. This phenomenon has been repeated in urban communities nationwide, demonstrating that the ghetto is not just a place but a structural process.⁶

Recognizing that a series of seemingly “blameless” widespread practices were the cause of modern-day inequality, and that creating a democratic America had to begin with basic planning issues surrounding how people made their lives with justice in housing, hiring, and education, Dr. King set out to mobilize citizens, politicians, real estate agents, business investors, and religious leaders for a summit. Following several months of tense negotiations (and mass rallies 50,000 strong), Mayor Richard J. Daley promised to establish fair housing in Chicago.⁷

Tragically, despite Dr. King’s other achievements, the promise of fair housing and an end to the ghettos of Chicago is yet to be fulfilled.

Cabrini-Green—a Metaphor for Inequality

Today, places such as Cabrini-Green serve to remind us that America remains a divided society with clear racial differences, not only in housing, but also in education, employment, life expectancy, exposure to toxics, legal access, and prison populations.

Ending poverty requires much more than tearing down dilapidated buildings and shifting their residents. People require not just adequate shelter but open spaces, farmers’ markets, clean environments, fair wages, reliable public transit, equitable schools, community centers, and the best and brightest of what urban planners can imagine for all.

Once home to nearly 15,000, most Cabrini-Green residents have moved out, even as gentrification is moving in. A handful of former residents have been able to secure homes in mixed housing developments, following a barrage of background checks. The vast majority of them, however, were given vouchers and pushed elsewhere even as the value of the property skyrocketed.

King believed that equitable cities can only be created when all of us—residents, politicians, workers, religious leaders, and community activists of every color—stop ignoring the existence of urban inequality in America. The construction of the Trump International Hotel and Residence and the nearby Spire tower (touted as the world’s tallest residential tower with its 1000+ condominiums with a view of four states) stand in stark contrast to King’s dream of equitable housing. These architectural feats are monuments to inequality. As long as men and women on the ground remain segregated by skin color, these symbols in the sky will represent this nation’s tremendous lost potential. ■

Endnotes

1. Saulny, Susan. “At Housing Project, Both Fear and Renewal.” *The New York Times*. March 18, 2007.
2. Wehrwein, Austin. “Dr. King Occupies a Flat in Slums.” *The New York Times*. January 26, 1966, p. 37.
3. Clark, Kenneth B. *Dark Ghetto: Dilemmas of Social Power*. New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1965.
4. Hirsch, Anthony. *Making the Second Ghetto: Race and Housing in Chicago 1940-1960*. Cambridge University Press, 1993.
5. Pulido, Laura. “Rethinking Environmental Racism: White Privilege and Urban Development in Southern California.” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 90, no.1. p.12-40. March 2000.
6. Sugrue, Thomas. *The Origins of The Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1996.
7. Ibid.

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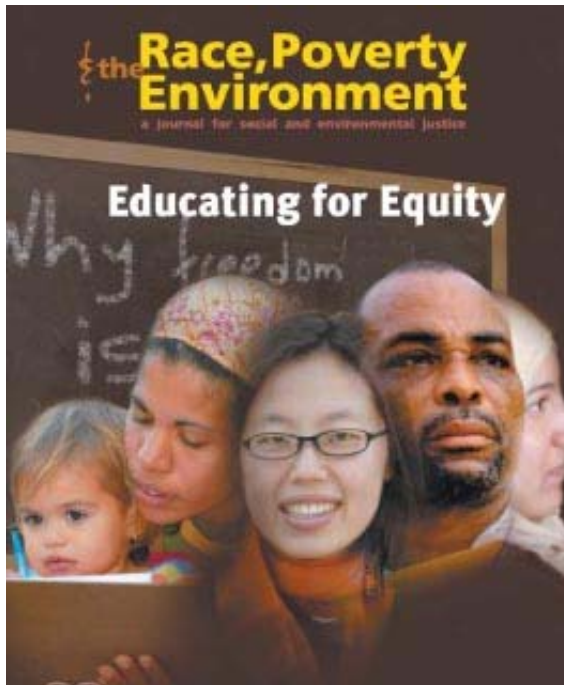
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