

Reading Tips and Study Questions: Session Four

Required reading:

Peter Marcuse, "Interpreting 'Public Housing' History," *Journal of Architectural and Planning Research* 12, 3 (Autumn 1995), pp. 240-258.

Lawrence J. Vale, Introduction to *Reclaiming Public Housing* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), pp. 1-36.

Vale, "Reclaiming Housing, Recovering Communities," conclusion to *Reclaiming Public Housing*, pp. 362-411.

Tips and questions

This first session of the case will introduce it via lecture by Prof. Vale. The next session will be run as an Ask-the-Expert session in which you should come prepared with questions that will help you complete the assignment, which is posted on the course website.

Case background. Public Housing in the United States began in the 1930s as the first major effort by the federal government to provide for the housing needs of low-income households—i.e., to provide "social housing." The approach included construction of rental housing developments ("projects") to be owned and managed by government. In Boston, as in many cities, public housing enjoyed more than two decades of initial success. By the end of the 1970s, however, the projects had failed miserably—in both social and architectural terms. The Boston Housing Authority (BHA), charged with managing these places, was a completely dysfunctional organization and was placed under court-ordered "receivership"—meaning it was considered incapable of governing and operating itself—in 1980.

During the receivership, the BHA launched three ambitious redevelopment efforts, at the West Broadway, Franklin Field, and Commonwealth housing projects. The three similarly designed projects had been built at the same time under the same government program and had experienced similar declines. Each received comparable funding for redevelopment (tens of millions of dollars), and each redevelopment team consisted of first-rate design and planning professionals who responded with similar "defensible space" redesign plans. Why, then, was one redevelopment effort (Commonwealth) touted nationally as a success story, another only a mixed success (West Broadway), and the third a widely acknowledged failure (Franklin Field)? To answer this question, one must understand several

classic tensions in planning as they apply to this case: complex neighborhood-specific struggles over race and poverty (in broad terms: planning for diverse publics and the conflicts that diversity can produce); the strengths and limits of physical design as a redevelopment tool for promoting social welfare; the cultural tensions over the proper roles to be played by the private and public sectors; and the roles of expert versus indigenous knowledge—i.e., the aims and expectations of both expert professionals and the resident communities that needed to work together.

1. **Marcuse** contends that the “reformer’s program” was but one iteration of public housing. Is his argument persuasive? Why or why not? If so, what caution does this history suggest planners should have about using government to guide important reforms? Consider what Friedmann, in our reading for last week, outlined as the social reform tradition in planning.
2. Now consider the **Vale** chapters. Before embarking on redevelopment efforts, BHA planners produced a study predicting the places where redevelopment would most likely prove effective and where it would be hardest to pull off. Correctly, they anticipated that Commonwealth would be most likely to succeed and that Franklin Field would be least likely. In taking action to improve public housing, does it make sense—whether on efficiency or equity or other bases—for planners to focus only on the “most likely to succeed” places?
3. If so, what social and political factors (such as the role of race) make it *difficult* to do this?
4. Alternatively, *how* can planners justify putting scarce dollars into places where, right from the start, successful redevelopment seems unlikely?