

## **Unit Two: Public Housing Redevelopment in Boston (Prof. Vale)**

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### 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.