On the Brink of "CHAnge" Ghetto Gentrification and Chicago's Robert Taylor Homes

“There can never be an aesthetic, art or architecture of class, but only a class critique of aesthetic, art, architecture and the city.”

–Manfredo Tafuri, Toward a Critique of Architectural Ideology

Abstract. This paper explores the shifting landscape of public housing in post-war America through the reformation of the Robert Taylor Homes in Chicago. As Michel Foucault contends, Space is a material wherein discourses about knowledge and power are transformed into actual relations of power. Architecture “becomes a question of using the disposition of space for economic-political ends.” This insight is essential to understanding the Homes original failures and the potential of the new plan. Public housing has been used by the State as an attempt to address urban poverty, a tool for social control, and more recently as a mechanism to spur urban growth. This designation of uses as expressed in the project’s spatial plans and architectural design relates closely to the social terrain that it helped form; a landscape of further entrenched sociospatial exclusion, poverty, criminalization, and incarceration, that has in turn made way for the newest form of slum clearance; gentrified, scatter-site, mixed income neighborhoods. The Chicago Housing Authority consistently justifies its new plan on its merits of design to construct a narrative of progress from a blighted legacy of the modernist superblocks to the hopeful future of New Urbanism. However, this assessment that currently dominates the government and media discourse has come to serves as an ideological smokescreen against which the true sites of social suffering are being exacerbated. By standing outside the circle of planning-production-consumption, or the larger economic and social context from which the buildings emerged and new plans derive, the critique masks motives and expressions of power embedded within the spaces of the Robert Taylor Homes and their future redevelopment. This paper reviews and critically analyzes the Taylor Homes history and the Chicago Housing Authority’s (CHA) “Plan for transformation” branded “CHAnge.”

I. An Island in a Sea of Despair

“One of the most attractive and livable communities in Chicago”

–Chicago Housing Authority Times: March 23, 1962

When the Robert Taylor Homes opened in 1962 it was the largest government subsidized public housing project on the globe. Taking three years to construct and costing over $70 million, the homes were seen as the boldest urban expression of the Kennedy era’s Progressive ideology. In the heart of Chicago’s Southside, in what was known at the time as “the largest contiguous slum in the United States,” the homes alleviated a housing shortage of dire magnitude.

Acknowledgement: The descriptions of the Robert Taylor Homes and its residents has been drawn primarily from Sudhir Alladi Venkatesh’s ethnography: American Project: The Rise and Fall of a Modern Ghetto.

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The homes were named after the former Chicago Housing Authority director Robert Taylor, a progressive leader, who envisioned open housing in the spirit of Le Corbusier and Walter Gropius, who believed in architecture’s possibility to “define a new approach to life.” Through improvements in building the individual would be enabled to develop him or herself on a higher level. And indeed, the homes demonstrated an advance for its 28,000 residents, many of whom had formerly lived in relatively disparaging conditions in the nearby neighborhood. Kitchenettes in each apartment with laundry facilities in the building’s basements were notable improvements from the communal cooking and wash buckets that still spotted the ghettos in shanty kiosks. David Wilson, who was born in Taylor 38 years ago remembers, “Growing up was good. Three bedrooms, sheesh, man you thought you was in heaven. At night it was beautiful. There were lights on every porch.” The earliest residents planted trees and flowerbeds in the few green spaces that dotted the superblocks, and life seemed to be looking up for Taylor’s inhabitants.

Through the rest of the decade and into the early seventies, public high-rise housing cleared slums further up State Street, eventually resulting in a continuous four-mile strip of “projects.” A Faustian drive in modernist garb transformed the “blackbelt” of earlier Chicago into a bureaucratized welfare space. However, it was not too long before these seemingly benevolent structures became viewed as the containers for victims of intense social suffering.

The high-rise superblock served as the organizational paradigm of post-war housing projects. The Robert Taylor Homes consisted of 28 sixteen-story towers. These double-loaded corridor apartment buildings may have successfully functioned for small middle- and upper-income families, but did not translate to the needs of large low-income families which the projects housed. Especially without the usual doormen, service, and janitorial staffs associated with most high-rise private developments, which are essential amenities to making dense arrangements workable, the structure soon posed serious problems.

The designs required positioning the elevators at the center of the corridor, which on the bottom floor produced circuitous passageways and hidden double turns to link the lobby and elevator bank. The stairways were encapsulated within vertical concrete boxes with little or no windows and the elevators had no means of surveillance. These ways of passage became the primary sites of robberies and drug deals. The defenseless spaces were neither public nor private since the homes were required by law to be open to the entire urban community. Consequently, the stairwells, elevators, lobbies, and common areas served as protected zones for activities that formerly had no interior option in the ghetto. Without any physical or symbolic barrier between the Taylor Homes and the bordering neighborhood, the problems of the streets conveniently moved into Taylor and throvied, leaving the two and four bedroom apartments as the only space left for personal protection.

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Dead Space

In some ways the postwar tower-in-the-park represents the ultimate expression of the 1930s' culture of decongestion with its buildings widely spaced on superblocks with astounding minimal ground coverage. On the site of the Robert Taylor Homes, only 7 of the 96 acres contained physical structures. However, the empty spaces were not filled with the bucolic gardens and green space envisioned in the Bauhaus model, but instead remained expanses of concrete and asphalt with no intended purpose. Its residents in turn interpreted this "dead space" as sites for parking, playgrounds for children, and an arena of public-violence and gang activity. As Lewis Mumford predicted in 1950, the superblock would generate the super-slam. Taylor’s concrete foras served as bleak canvases for the towers’ looming shadows that cast over the untamable landscape. The superblocks’ design of decongestion cut off traffic through the project and, in doing so, depleted the mutual surveillance provided by the casual passerby and motorist. The compositional mode of planning was void of any organic connection between the homes and their urban context with the ground’s plazas standing in harsh relief with the surrounding environs. The residents were left in isolation both inside and out. The dead spaces disconnected residents from the grounds and surrounding community while the problems of the high-rise prototype disassociated them from their own building’s lobbies, stairways, and elevators. The Taylor homes were intended to serve the community as an island of hope - a safe haven - but in turn became an island that only compounded the problems of the marginalized community that it had been embedded in, turning this “beacon of hope” into the city’s most stigmatized address.

Territorial Stigmatization

The high rises, uniformed alternatively in red and grey brick, could be seen from many points in the city by both wealthy and poor. They were landmarks, both to the commuting suburbanites in their daily drives over the Dan Ryan Expressway, and to the struggling African Americans living in the ghetto that bordered its other side. Wedged between these two separate worlds, the Taylor Homes were understood by both communities as “poorly-built monuments to the halfhearted attempts at benevolence”. From within, residents felt powerful stigma attached to their ‘neighborhood of exile.’ Resident’s voice this sense of being cut off from and cast out of the larger society (Wacquant, 1996) 8.

“People really look down on you because of where you come from and who you are. People don’t want to have anything to do with you.”

“Friends from other places don’t really want to come here. And you yourself, you wouldn’t want to invite intelligent people here: there’s markings and there’s writing on the wall, nasty, whatever.”

“Your address, its impression for jobs.”

The defamation of the Taylor homes is inscribed in the brute fact of their physical dilapidation and separateness. The dehumanizing facades and dead spaces that could be identified from afar were inwardly reflected in the equally stigmatized interior typology of institutional design. Glazed tiles permeate throughout every square foot of the buildings’ lobbies, stairways, and elevators. The Taylor homes were intended to serve the community as an island of hope - a safe haven - but in turn became an island that only compounded the problems of the marginalized community that it had been embedded in, turning this “beacon of hope” into the city’s most stigmatized address.

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Building For Children & Dangerous Spaces

The tower-in-the-park was perversely articulated in the case of the Robert Taylor Homes, not only in its lack of lived and green spaces, but also in its failure to decongest the slum – one of its primary goals. The Taylor high-rise development became synonymous with density – not of buildings, but of people. This is nowhere more apparent than in its vast population of children. In an average year, 20,000 of the homes 28,000 residents were school-aged. It was soon realized that the recreational areas were utterly inadequate. It was not uncommon to see 2,000 children crammed into the two playgrounds on the Taylor site, and it was not too long before that the dead spaces came to serve as primary playgrounds for the children becoming improvised spaces of play despite the warnings and threats of adults. Parents tried to keep children away from train tracks, frowned upon the use of lobbies as play places, and instructed them to steer clear of alleys, but the Taylor Homes seemed to be a trap designed for dangerous encounters.

Within the buildings, the elevator quickly became the top attraction. For the approximately 800 children in each building, the elevator was a play place that offered hours of enjoyment amidst the dangerous conditions that lay outside on the Taylor grounds. As Bobby Dowell remembers, “We used to ride them like we was at Great America (theme park). Popping them buttons, loading as many kids as we could, trying to climb out of them if we could”11. By the end of the 1960s, the deterioration of the elevators reached crisis, with 75 percent of them being recorded as “non-functional.” Several children were injured from faulty elevators, and one was killed trying to climb out, while several other lives were lost as paramedics and firemen were unable to reach victims in time of danger.

The insecurity bred from these dangerous spaces, both for children and for the residents at large carried serious psychological effects. Lee Rainwater, in his article “Fear and the House-as-Haven” claims that feelings of insecurity about one’s residential environment often lead to the adoption of a negative and defeatist view of oneself, to ambivalence about job finding, and to expressions of general impotence in the capacity to cope with the outside world12. By the early seventies, the Taylor Homes were seeping with desperation.

The primary criteria for these amenities were durability and cost, an obvious contradiction. The residents’ had no choice about these simple design aspects and were prohibited from repairing any broken fixtures. This inability to participate in the quality of their physical surroundings reinforced the Taylor residents’ state of dependence, which they were constantly reminded of in their degrading buildings. Their exclusion from society was felt in job interviews as employers read the project addresses on résumé’s and discarded them, along with their new place in America’s popular imagination, as the name of the “Robert Taylor Homes” became synonymous with the problems of the ghetto.

Building For Children & Dangerous Spaces

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Now that the final tower has been destroyed, the Chicago Housing Authority is once again using the same State Street site to spearhead the largest of the Federal Government’s new initiatives in public housing reform. "CHAnge and the Plan for Transformation" promises to give its residents a "new lease on life". The authority plans to do this by designing out the old problems, building mixed-income communities through various public-private partnerships. The housing will be low rise in character, "where the people, not the housing will soar to new levels," according to the CHA's promotional video, and will reflect contemporary building styles. The new community, renamed Legends South, will include rental apartments, condominiums and townhouses which will be installed with up-to-date fixtures and appliances, ample space, and abundant light. Besides this, other projects of gentrification are planned nearby, such as the sleek looking Carroll Washington Cultural Center and new retail outlets. CHAnge's goal is to deconcentrate poverty and break down the de-socializing processes wrought by the older skyscrapers. The Philadelphia firm Wallace Roberts & Todd has been hired to direct this $1.5 billion transformation, which is the destruction of the Pruitt-Igoe Housing complex, a similar superblock settlement embedded within the urbanized ghetto of St. Louis. In 1977, architectural critic Charles Jencks declared its destruction as marking "the death of high modernism". One year earlier, Rowe and Koetter included a photo of Pruitt-Igoe in their postmodern credo "Collage City". Both works present the "project" as representative of the ideas of Hofstheimer, Le Corbusier, and CIAM. This interpretation gained widespread acceptance and has perpetuated what Katharine Bristol has come to call the "Pruitt-Igoe Myth"; the unanimity that the project's demise demonstrated an architectural failure. Such accounts, as the one so far presented in this paper, fail to locate public housing in its historical context of economic crises and racial discrimination. The myth shifts attention away from the institutional and structural forces and simultaneously legitimates the architect by implying that design can cure deeply embedded social suffering. In the end, "The myth is a mystification that benefits everyone involved, except those to whom public housing programs are supposedly directed." Conventional architectural analysis is simply inadequate in understanding the polycausal scale of the Taylor Homes demise and the underlying logic of Legends South. It operates purely on the surface, standing outside the circle of planning-production-consumption, and works unilaterally on one-side of the sociospatial dialectic. The critics of public housing design, such as Oscar Newman, whose work has been used extensively in the first part of this paper, are not responsible for the myth. Such architecture as the primary source of public housing’s failure is not new. The most iconic example of this ploy is the destruction of the Pruitt-Igoe Housing complex, a similar superblock settlement embedded within the urbanized ghetto of St. Louis. In 1977, architectural critic Charles Jencks declared its destruction as marking “the death of high modernism.” One year earlier, Rowe and Koetter included a photo of Pruitt-Igoe in their postmodern credo “Collage City.” Both works present the “project” as a product of the ideas of Hofstheimer, Le Corbusier, and CIAM. 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analyses are important contributions to the study of the built environment and their behavioral and social effects. However, this form of critique attempts only to understand the social pathologies produced by spatial relationships, not the social relationships that formed the spaces in the first place. Henri Lefebvre understands both sides of this dynamic process in dialectical terms claiming “social life structures space and that space shapes social life”17. It is in this way that the social theorist can best serve architectural practice - not simply as design consultants, but as critical readers of the tactics of power embedded in building and space.

Proceeding in this article, the same spaces of the Robert Taylor Homes will be explored from the other side of the socio-spatial dialectic from an operative critique that understands the urban as both medium and outcome of the continuously changing conflictual social relations of capital18. From this alternative perspective, space reveals a new history of failure and displays the way in which the conventional narrative of architectural failure and progress has come to serve the city’s pro-growth interests against its urban underclass; a narrative that has itself become a facade to commit the next wave of slum clearance at the expense of society’s most marginalized populations.

“Urban Renewal” or Negro Removal

To understand the so-called “modern ghetto” of the Robert Taylor Homes it is first important to recognize its historical formation. Although the early urban scholars of the Chicago School had labeled several neighborhoods by ethnicity on their infamous map of concentric circles, the “black belt” of the Southside was the only one that actually held a majority (that is more than 50%) of any single racial group19. Unlike the immigrant enclaves, the black ghetto was an involuntarily spatially concentrated area used by the dominant society to separate and to limit the population group. As Chicago factories recruited rural southern blacks to break down the city’s emerging labor power, they were faced with inflated rents and ever denser conditions.

The government’s decision to locate the Taylor Homes within this forced settlement only increased the degree of sociospatial exclusion faced by Chicago’s black population. Before the homes were slated to be built in the heart of this struggling neighborhood, various locations were proposed to avoid just this problem. However in each case, white community members prevailed with “not in my backyard” arguments, and the black politicians lobbied for the homes to be located in their own districts to strengthen their voting bloc20.

The Homes’ proximity to the Dan Ryan Expressway is yet another expression of racially motivated planning. More generally, the highway subsidized the suburbanization that allowed wealthier whites (who could afford cars) to abandon those too poor to benefit from the Federal governments Veterans and Homeowner loan programs. This fleeing tax base created the fiscal crisis that would contribute to the Taylor Home’s eventual demise. More directly, the Dan Ryan Expressway was a project of ‘Urban Renewal’ or what has commonly been called ‘Negro Removal.’ Such projects were carried out throughout US cities, clearing ‘slums’ for projects of ‘improvement.’ Though these projects were quite successful in clearing low-income housing, they were not nearly so successful in creating new affordable housing units. In fact, most of the nation’s housing “projects” of the 1960s, including the Taylor Homes, were directly tied to the housing shortages created by “Urban Renewal” and rarely compensated for even half of the housing stock destroyed21. Thus several former residents of the community that had been destroyed from the highway’s construction were relocated into the towers of Taylor, while the highway itself served as a racial buffer to segregate the ghetto dwellers from the social services and white communities on the opposite side.

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Site of the Robert Taylor Homes
Taylor Homes, the new “plan for transformation” has “overcome” this challenge by avoiding the problem of urban marginality altogether. The Housing

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physically. Thus the originally intended communal architecture of the Robert Taylor Homes was expropriated as exclusionary, authoritarian, and even oppressive within its economic and political contexts. The development was deteriorating both socially and

and intense surveillance. All of this occurred during continual cutbacks in the country’s already meager welfare support program.

This can be described of what sociologist Loic Wacquant has called the shift from the “communal” to “hyper-ghetto” and the epicenter of the crisis. By the early nineties, six of the poorest US census areas with populations above 2,500 were found within the Taylor Homes’ territory. Ninety-five percent of the housing development’s 20,000 residents were unemployed into spaces of control, marked by police occupation, and intense surveillance. All of this occurred during continual cutbacks in the country’s already meager welfare support program.

The problems of the ghetto were most intense after all Reagan’s “War on Drugs” that initiated the carceral continuum between the Taylor Projects and Federal prisons beginning in the ‘80s, and further marginalized the houses population. This ultimately transformed the physical fabric of the community within the houses of Robert Taylor, which became

and listed public assistance as their only income source. 40 percent of the units were occupied by single-parent, female-headed-households earning less than $5,000 per year and rates of violent crime and gang activity were among the highest in Chicago. The development was also Manfredo Tafuri who understand the metropolis as the general form assumed by the process of technical rationalization and objectification of social relations brought about by the monetary economy, we must also come to understand the Robert Taylor Homes as both cause and expression of the post-1970s economic crisis. This can be described of what sociologist Loic Wacquant has called the shift from the “communal” to “hyper-ghetto”.

Perhaps dominating all of these critical readings is capitalism’s modification of social relationships within the Taylor Homes. Following George Simmel and Manfredo Tafuri who understand the metropolis as the general form assumed by the process of technical rationalization and objectification of social relations brought about by the monetary economy, we must also come to understand the Robert Taylor Homes as both cause and expression of the post-1970s economic crisis. This can be described of what sociologist Loic Wacquant has called the shift from the “communal” to “hyper-ghetto”.

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The earlier communal ghetto was defined by a mix of social classes. Because all blacks were segregated into the ghetto without choice, every class was represented within its territory. This created a web of social support as well as an internal economy of locally owned shops and banks that benefited the community at large. The booming industrial sector of the city was also a source of relatively steady jobs and employment. This form of society began to break down in the early 1970s. Because all blacks were

and expressed of political power, introduces its own particular way of partitioning space, its own particular administrative classification of discourses about space and about things and people in space. Each form commands space, as it were to serve its purposes.” The role of the state in the case of the Taylor Homes becomes apparent through the combination of policy and spatial analysis regarding the Homes.

The move from the CHA’s original blueprint of social engineering intended to create a community “mix” of poor, middle-, and working-class families was in large part caused by the Federal government’s mandate that forced the Authority to reject any applicant who did not earn less than $5,200 a year. CHA was also susceptible to the political winds in Washington, which could reduce their operating budgets, often without warning. Though the Chicago city government is often held responsible for the spatial neglect of the Taylor homes, one cannot ignore the influence of Federal policy. It was after all Reagan’s “War on Drugs” that initiated the carceral continuum between the Taylor Projects and Federal prisons beginning in the ‘80s, and further marginalized the houses population. This ultimately transformed the physical fabric of the community into spaces of control, marked by police occupation, and intense surveillance. All of this occurred during continual cutbacks in the country’s already meager welfare support program.

The Post-Fordist Shift and the Emergence of the Hyper-Ghetto

The earlier communal ghetto was defined by a mix of social classes. Because all blacks were segregated into the ghetto without choice, every class was represented within its territory. This created a web of social support as well as an internal economy of locally owned shops and banks that benefited the community at large. The booming industrial sector of the city was also a source of relatively steady jobs and employment. This form of society began to break down in the early 1970s. Because all blacks were
Authority has been able to do this by extolling the architectural improvements while ignoring the larger fact that the program will likely perpetuate the housing shortage, increase income inequality, and raise the overall economic insecurity of former public housing residents. Denise Scott Brown, in assessing the failure of the 1960s public housing programs, noted that “Civic designers’ inspiration must come from the reality of the world around them, sometimes from its hard reality.” As will be seen again, the plan for Legends South operates entirely at odds with this reality in an elitist fantasy of new urbanism; a disneyfied mode of transformation and an exemplary expression of postmodern idealism. The current problems faced by residents will merely be displaced and further entrenched within society, so that the Taylor Home’s site can be absorbed into the city’s ‘productive’ urban fabric as a place to capture increased rent while servicing the city as a gentrified site of consumption.

Public Housing: A Tool of the Bourgeoisie

“Turning a legacy of hardship into a future of Hope”
-CHA promotional video for Legends South

“Space itself, at once a product of the capitalist mode of production and an economic-political instrument of the bourgeoisie, will now be seen to embody its own contradictions. The dialectic thus emerges from time and actualizes itself, operating now, in an unforeseen manner, in space.” -Henri Lefebvre, The Production of Space

City as Growth Machine

Architecture and criticism are both techniques of power that are utilized by those who wield it. Architects cannot by themselves reallocate power or even find solutions to power struggles. As Foucault recognizes, an architect is not someone who power passes through or even an important player in the fields of power relations. However, he quickly concedes that “one must take him (the architect) – his mentality, his attitude – into account as well as his projects in order to understand a certain number of techniques of power that we invest in architecture.” To understand an investment one must understand the architect’s clientele.

John Logan and Harvey Molotch in their famous 1987 formulation recognize that, “For those who count, the city is a growth machine, one that can increase aggregate rents and trap related wealth for those in the right position to benefit.” This growth consensus is so unanimous among stakeholders, that they essentially eliminate any alternative vision of the purpose of local government or meaning of community. In today’s post-Fordist society we are seeing new processes focused on commoditizing place designed to create positive “people climates,” through staging an urban ambience that is attractive to investment and higher income knowledge workers. CHAnge makes clear that public housing is a serious site to engage these principles at the expense of the welfare of its former inhabitants. This is evident in the fact that most of the Taylor residents will not receive new homes from the CHA. The last round of the Taylor Homes destruction cleared 2600 units. Currently, 682 families from these apartments have been displaced into private market apartments and 593 to other public housing sites. The master plan only allocates a third of the new apartments to “public housing residents” while the rest will be market-leased at affordable and market rates.

Sudhir Alladi Venkatesh, the sociologist whose ethnography American Project is the definitive work on the Taylor community, has been following 400 families who used to live the homes, and suggests that the problem is even greater. So far, 80 percent of the families have moved to poor minority areas while only a small number have significantly improved their situation. The CHA is Authority has been able to do this by extolling the architectural improvements while ignoring the larger fact that the program will likely perpetuate the housing shortage, increase income inequality, and raise the overall economic insecurity of former public housing residents. Denise Scott Brown, in assessing the failure of the 1960s public housing programs, noted that “Civic designers’ inspiration must come from the reality of the world around them, sometimes from its hard reality.” As will be seen again, the plan for Legends South operates entirely at odds with this reality in an elitist fantasy of new urbanism; a disneyfied mode of transformation and an exemplary expression of postmodern idealism. The current problems faced by residents will merely be displaced and further entrenched within society, so that the Taylor Home’s site can be absorbed into the city’s ‘productive’ urban fabric as a place to capture increased rent while servicing the city as a gentrified site of consumption.

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City as Growth Machine

Architecture and criticism are both techniques of power that are utilized by those who
clearly no longer in the business of securing housing for the city’s most marginalized populations, but instead is acting as a vital cog in the growth machine, playing an integral role in the advancing regime of predatory planning.

Despite all of this, CHAnge has received some sort of positive review from all of the major Chicago newspapers, and is serving as the poster child of HUD’s Hope VI initiative, even though housing and social equity is a secondary goal at best. Architecture is the method; the goal is to transform these economically redundant spaces into new sites for capital accumulation at the expense of the city’s poorest. The former public housing residents are clearly no longer the clients of the Chicago Housing Authority. Now it is “those who count” in utilizing the city as a growth machine that the Authority serves. This shift in the CHA’s clientele has been produced by the authority’s own failure. The government subsidized housing “projects” of the ‘60s have become a problem unto themselves, allowing the public to ignore the more essential problem of urban marginality. The Chicago Housing Authority now intends to fix its old problems through a face lift in an exercise of New Urbanism, without ever addressing the former resident’s needs or the structural inequalities that create them.

It is important to realize that this “Plan for Transformation” is not unique to Chicago. Initially passed in 1993, the Hope VI program has distributed $4 billion in grants to redevelop failed modernist public housing sites into mixed-use, mixed-income communities. The Congress for the New Urbanism (CNU) was instrumental in providing design guidelines and training for HUD in implementing the program. The Philadelphia firm Wallace Roberts & Todd, which is designing Legends South, has already netted $166.5 million in Hope VI funding and is currently working on projects in Atlanta, Philadelphia, Jersey City, and Hagerstown (MD).

Mainstreaming the Underclass

The Chicago Housing Authority’s promotional video claims, “Legends South will blend seamlessly into the fabric of the surrounding neighborhoods.” This architectural agenda intends to erase the segregated notion of Chicago’s Southside ghetto and along with it, its classic representation as a “City within a City”20. To white Chicagoans, the ghetto is a separate place, where residents are at once removed from the rest of society, actively evading that society, and creating lifestyles at odd with that society21. The Robert Taylor Homes were the extreme example of this self-governing but ultimately dysfunctional urban community, unwilling and unable to follow the ideals of mainstream society.

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In the 1960’s Tafuri reflected, “Almost all the economic objectives formulated by Keynes in his General Theory could be found, in purely ideological form, at the basis of the poetics of modern architecture”22. Today we can read the “Plan for
Transformation” in similar ideological terms as the poetics of postmodernism, or at least that of the post-Fordist society. As mentioned earlier, urban governments have shifted to the reality of new service economy in focusing on commoditizing place to create “positive “people climates.” The goal is to attract a wealthier work force and open up territory for investment. A decade ago it would have been unthinkable for businesses, banks, and middle class residents to locate at the site of the Robert Taylor Homes. At Legends South, retail outlets are sketched into the blueprints. The high-rise housing “projects” that were designed to hold the smokestack industrial workers of the Fordist era were simply ill equipped to house the service workers in Chicago’s gentrifying post-industrial landscape.

The stylistic transference from skyscraper to low rise, pitched roof, row homes, and tree-lined sidewalks is also an expression of the contemporary ideology of Late Capitalism. The project has adopted the New Urbanist manifesto that seeks to replicate the dense scale of the pedestrian city and nostalgic architecture of various bygone eras and places. If Herbert Muschamp, the architecture critic for the New York Times, is to be believed, the New Urbanism is “the most important phenomenon to emerge in American architecture in the post-Cold War era”37. Rowe and Koetter suggest that there are only two reservoirs of ethical content available for architecture: tradition and utopia, or whatever intimations of significance our notions of tradition and utopia may still provide35. The Utopian Idealism expressed in the Keynesian era has been replaced by a mellow, and conservative tradition of New Urbanism in the postmodern city. However, there is no reason to believe that the abuses of tradition are any less great than the abuses of utopia. After all, there is no mystery about for whom this New Urbanism is built. The design styles enact the most traditional social assumptions of gender, class and race, codifying a wide plank of privileged presumptions and social norms36. It is perhaps an even more narrow and elitist fantasy than the modernist dream itself.

It is hard to differentiate the Chicago Housing Authority’s “Plan for Transformation” from the gentrification projects designed by private development corporations, and the truth is there is little or none. The Keynesian-contract has been broken, and as a result, spaces of urbanistic neoliberalism have emerged. This new world-view mobilizes city space as an arena both for market-oriented economic growth and elite consumption practices. In so doing, it subjects the majority of the population to the power of market forces whilst preserving social protection for the strong. This has been the precise experience of the Robert Taylor residents. According to a recent Ford Foundation report, most former residents have been left to the market with housing vouchers and have since been absorbed into the most segregated neighborhoods while paying a higher percent of their income to rent than before. This new landscape of neoliberalism only mainstreams the few public housing residents of the redesigned community - the lucky few who are mere symbolic placeholders to save the ‘social service’ face of the Housing Authority, while the vast majority has become further marginalized into the diasporic spaces of neoliberalism.

Locating the Dominant Discourse: Abstract vs. Social Space

The discourse surrounding public housing is no longer centered on the problems of poverty that it originally sought to solve, but instead has turned to the problems of the blighted high-rise structures and the social pathologies that they themselves created. The praise received by CHA has been entirely in terms of the dominant class and its ideology: to increase the site’s exchange value through privatization. However, as the government seeks to increase the space’s exchange value it has reduced its use-value for low-income people. The authority claims that it is improving the lives of its residents, without recognizing the displacement of most of their old tenets. Furthermore, the CHA merely assumes that these residents consider themselves better off in their newly gentrified gheto. Before the residents knew whether or not they would be the “lucky recipient” of a new home or a voucher recipient, there was protest among community members. Not because all the residents were necessarily fond of the Taylor Homes but because they felt that alternative housing outside would be too expensive and therefore unavailable36. It is hard to differentiate the Chicago Housing Authority’s “Plan for Transformation” from the gentrification projects designed by private development corporations, and the truth is there is little or none. The Keynesian-contract has been broken, and as a result, spaces of urbanistic neoliberalism have emerged. This new world-view mobilizes city space as an arena both for market-oriented economic growth and elite consumption practices. In so doing, it subjects the majority of the population to the power of market forces whilst preserving social protection for the strong. This has been the precise experience of the Robert Taylor residents. According to a recent Ford Foundation report, most former residents have been left to the market with housing vouchers and have since been absorbed into the most segregated neighborhoods while paying a higher percent of their income to rent than before. This new landscape of neoliberalism only mainstreams the few public housing residents of the redesigned community - the lucky few who are mere symbolic placeholders to save the ‘social service’ face of the Housing Authority, while the vast majority has become further marginalized into the diasporic spaces of neoliberalism.

Locating the Dominant Discourse: Abstract vs. Social Space
The contention between the users or inhabitants of the Taylor site and the CHA can be described in terms of what Lefebvre calls “abstract” and “social space”. Thus, the incompatibility of use and exchange value causes space itself to become an object of social conflict. The redevelopment represents an attack on Taylor residents’ place of residence, an assault on their “home,” and a disruption of their “habitus” of social activities and everyday life.

The form and function of the Chicago Housing Authority has been redefined. Whereas in the past the CHA was devoted primarily to various forms of welfare service delivery, it has now been transformed into an entrepreneurial agency oriented above all towards the promotion of economic development. Visiting the Chicago Housing Authority’s website makes clear that the department is no longer in the business of social services, but is rather enacting a plan for capital8. As public services decline, the agency seems to be spending more money on marketing, PR consultants, and the like, while leveraging serious investments from private entities who seek to benefit from the development.

The contentment between the users or inhabitants of the Taylor site and the CHA can be described in terms of what Lefebvre calls “abstract” and “social space”8. “Abstract space” according to Lefebvre, is the space of instrumental rationality, fragmentation, homogenization, and, most importantly, commodification. It is the use of space by capitalists and state actors who are interested in the abstract qualities of space, including size, width, area, location, and profit. In contrast, “social space” is the space of everyday lived experience, an environment as a place to live and to call home. In the case of the Taylor Homes we see the steamroller of commodification transforming the use value of its inhabitant’s social space into the exchange value of abstract space, while the modern bureaucratic state imposes its instrumental control.

Concurrently, this spatial interchange and dispersion destroys the ability of people to forge meaningful social relationships. Barbara Moore, one of the last residents to leave the Taylor Homes said, “I just feel like I left part of my body, I feel empty and hollow inside. It was my home, I loved it. And I still do.” The history of the Taylor Homes is filled with stories of neighborhood activism, hall councils, and parent groups actively engaging in expressions of public freedom against their challenges, both within their own community and with the Chicago Housing Authority. The new plans dispersion of residents destroyed this community’s collective capacity to address its own problems amidst uneven urban development, a lack of affordable housing, and the general anti-poor sentiment shared by the nation. Thus, the incompatibility of use and exchange value causes space itself to become an object of social conflict. The redevelopment represents an attack on Taylor residents’ place of residence, an assault on their “home,” and a disruption of their “habitus” of social activities and everyday life.

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This has resulted in a struggle amongst the former residents to navigate their way through the new plan, as the bureaucratic vehicle is becoming more and more directed towards economic development. In the course of my research I too ran against this bureaucratic barrier of information. Call after call I was rerouted to multiple answering machines and housing authority employees who could not answer my simple question. It was only on my third attempt that I finally received an answer, which was due only to my personal insistence for a connection to ... which I figured would be one of the most active and well-staffed wings of the agency. Ironically, all I wanted to know was when the final tower would be torn down. The bureaucratic labyrinth points to the broader truth that this critical narrative has come to conclude: that there is no person, agency or single interest at large to separate the malevolent “them” from the peaceful “us” in the case of the Robert Taylor Homes. As Manuel Castells has noted, the complexities, interdependencies and rapid pace at which the new communication networks operate means that no one or nothing “truly holds power in front of this abstract force of a system of flows whose effects are being felt in every dimension of our life.”10. The inadequacies of addressing poverty implicit in the “Plan for Transformation” cannot be blamed on any particular agency or group of
individuals. Instead it is the broader operations of capital and the urban growth consensus that account for these territorial upheavals in the postmodern city. Thus the Robert Taylor Homes will remain an "open secret of the forgotten city" that’s violent effacement of space we dare not admit and may comfortably not remember.

"Space is fundamental in any form of communal life; space is fundamental in any exercise of power." – Michel Foucault

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22. Ibid.
25. Bristol: 169
30. Ibid.
31. Venkatesh. 27.
32. Tafuri: 18.
34. Rowe and Koetter: 99.
41. Rowe and Koetter: 99.
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53. Ibid.
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"A coherent Marxist critique of architectural and urbanistic ideology can only demystify the contingent, historical – and in no way objective or universal – realities that lie hidden behind the unifying categories of the terms "art," "architecture," and the "city".

-Manfredo Tafuri