

NEIGHBORHOODS SOUTHEAST SEATTLE COMMUNITY HISTORY PROJECT

Public Housing in Southeast Seattle: 1940 – Present

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I. A Wartime Housing Crisis

Fifteen years before Rainier Vista and Holly Park were built, there was no established thoroughfare running through the area of southeast Seattle where the two housing projects stand today. In 1915, the Seattle Times described the landscape, which is roughly four miles south of the city center, as “barren” and “unsettled.” Though separated by a mile and a half of Empire Way, the two developments were built on essentially similar terrain -- boggy ground, jammed against Beacon Hill, where, in this sparsely settled section of the city, relatively few people farmed or lived.

In 1999, the Seattle Times, in an article about the redevelopment of Rainier Vista, again weighed in on that stretch of the since re-named Martin Luther King Jr. Way, calling it “prime land.” This would be a relatively unremarkable transformation in the life of a young city if it weren’t for the fact that for the majority of the eighty-four intervening years, that area of the Rainier Valley was suspended in an often troubled isolation.

This is the story of how decisions made in the 1940s determined those 172 forlorn acres at city’s periphery would become one of the primary places where Seattle housed its poor.

The Beginnings of the Seattle Housing Authority

In 1939, Jesse Epstein, a lawyer and recent University of Washington graduate, was tasked by the State Legislature with learning how Seattle could secure funding through the Wallace-Steagal Housing Act passed by Congress in 1937. The Housing Act was a banner piece of New Deal legislation designed to fund the “slum clearance” initiatives of local housing authorities.

On March 13, 1939, the Seattle City Council authorized the creation of the Seattle Housing Authority with Epstein as its first executive director. The SHA’s first initiative was a classic slum clearance project – replacing the vice district at the southern edge of downtown dubbed “Profanity Hill” with 700 units of public housing.

As in other American cities, a generation of cheaply constructed wood frame housing had sprouted up without the benefit of planning or regulation. Once at Seattle’s outskirts, by the late 1930s, Profanity Hill stood on prime land, and threatened to choke the city’s growth.

Federal housing regulations stipulated that for every new housing unit built with government funds, one sub-standard unit had to be put out of use permanently, which meant that in addition to the 470 dwellings cleared from the housing project site, another 230 had to be destroyed elsewhere. Few of the former residents of Profanity Hill returned to live at Yesler Terrace.

Conceived and built by an all-star team of architects, planners, and contractors, Yesler Terrace was remarkable both for its design and the fact that it was racially integrated from the start. As SHA’s first annual report in 1941 put it, with the construction of Yesler Terrace, “Seattle shall soon see one of its most ugly and disreputable areas transformed into a carefully designed and constructed residential district.”

A Wartime Housing Crisis

With the outbreak of World War II in 1939, the end of the Great Depression was evident. Seattle was bursting at the seams with out-of-towners ready to work. Logging and farming towns in places like Idaho and Montana emptied out as their inhabitants made their way to Seattle in hopes of landing a job at Boeing, Isaacson Ironworks, the Todd Shipyards, or the other supporting industries that were furiously ramping up production.

A 1941 Seattle Times article sets the scene: "Auto and trailer camps, jammed to overflowing and with their 'no vacancy' signs out; newcomers actually sleeping in automobile garages, not knowing where to look for better shelter; dark, windowless attics of old houses, crammed with ten or twenty defense workers' cots, or as many as they will hold." By the end of that year, the federal government was threatening to suspend defense contracts if Seattle did not address its housing shortage.

Instead, since the same crisis was unfolding in other US industrial centers, the federal government stepped in to help. In 1940 Congress passed the Lanham Act, which provided funds for local housing authorities like the SHA to build housing for defense workers and servicemen, provided that the permanent housing be available as regular low-income housing after the wartime emergency was over.

With the passage of the Lanham Act, the low income requirement and the stipulation that for every unit built an equivalent number of sub-standard units must be destroyed were abandoned. In July of 1942, armed forces personnel were declared ineligible for Lanham housing until the housing needs of in-migrant civilian defense industry workers were met.

Supporting industry was a new emphasis for the SHA. The Lanham Act was not aimed at alleviating poverty, but was rather a part of the society-wide mobilization around World War II. Incidentally, as manager of a vast military, industrial, and social project, the government was enabling a new kind of middle class prosperity in wartime Seattle and afterward.

The typical job seeker new in town was a young man at the start of a career and a family. Men worked as mechanics and line inspectors and their wives might be working in a defense industry job themselves. Accordingly, the Lanham Act provided that childcare should be offered at each housing project.

People were getting back to work, moving around the country, starting careers. In that context, the legitimacy of government's right to build public housing was never seriously in question. By 1942, the federal government was the largest landlord in the history of the United States.

Building Rainier Vista and Holly Park

For the fifty years leading up to WWII, the population of the Rainier Valley was stable at around 35,000 residents, about 98 percent of whom were white. The area was then known for the truck farmers who lived there, some of whom helped to start up the Pike Place Market.

The sleepy status quo was disrupted on July 4th, 1941, when it was announced that President Roosevelt had authorized \$1,750,000 for defense worker housing that was to be built in the Rainier Valley, and construction was to start within fifty days.

Site selection was the key to rapid construction. First, the proximity of the housing to industry was key. The projects were all clustered around the Duwamish industrial area where the Boeing Aircraft Company and the shipyards were based. But, as a 1950 SHA report indicates, “the primary consideration in locating the permanent war housing projects was the availability of sufficiently large vacant sites suitably equipped with utility lines.”

Land in the Rainier Valley was the cheapest in the city and, with few property owners to be displaced, there would be a minimum of political opposition to hold up construction. The downside of big swathes of land that nobody else had designs on was that they were isolated from the core of the city and lacked basic infrastructure, a problem that lingered well past the projects’ use as defense housing.

During the early phase of Rainier Vista’s construction, Charles C. Hughes, Seattle’s building superintendent, asked the SHA director why the city’s projects were “placed in locations that have no facilities, so that the city has to build mains to them?” Days later, Hughes would refuse to issue the SHA a permit to install water mains for Rainier Vista, maintaining that the plan was not up to city code.

Given the acute housing crisis and the scarcity of building material, which was being channeled to the war effort, the emphasis in constructing the Lanham Act housing was on rapidity and economy. In mid-1942 construction came to a halt for several weeks due to lumber rationing rules that prioritized direct military use for building materials.

Though the firm Western Construction Company won the contracts to build both projects, according to the SHA, “subcontractors and material suppliers included virtually all of the well established firms in the City of Seattle.” (SHA Annual Report, 1942)

Five months after construction began at Rainier Vista in September of 1941, the SHA had received 1,100 applications to live in the planned 500 units, which were spread among 231 one-story buildings on just under 90 acres. Less than a year after ground was broken at the site, the project was fully occupied. Average rent for a household of two at Rainier Vista was \$28 per month.

A mile and a half to the south, a couple of blocks off of Empire Way on the side of Beacon Hill, the Holly Park projects were built. The first 300 units opened on September 20, 1942. By the time it was finished almost a year later, the project consisted of 900 units--almost double the capacity of Rainier Vista.

For Epstein and the other administrators charged with building Seattle’s housing projects, the construction of a large development from scratch was naturally an exercise in what would today be called “social engineering.” As a public housing official explained on a local radio program in 1940, “every square foot of the project is planned on paper, so that its use is known before a shovel-full of earth is turned.” (“The place/placing of public projects”, 1940). In the early days of public housing, this was seen as an opportunity to shape and improve the lives of people in the communities they were building.

Adapting the “garden city” plan of British public housing constructed during WWI, Rainier Vista and Holly Park were planned as self-contained mini-communities. The street pattern at both projects was laid out in a curvilinear pattern typical of suburban settlement, contrasting with the

rectangular regularity of the surrounding street grid. The project layout was divided into “upper” and “lower” Holly Park by the electrical transmission lines that ran through it. The clusters of buildings were separated by large open spaces.

Holly Park consisted of 339 one- and two-story buildings, spread over 108 acres. In scale, the buildings matched Seattle’s low-slung, single-family residential architecture. In contrast to the post-war cement high-rise projects that would spring up in major cities to the East, Rainier Vista and Holly Park were constructed as free-standing wood-frame duplexes and four-plexes of no more than two stories. But the style of the barracks-like buildings contrasted sharply with the single family homes in the surrounding neighborhood, which tended to be working class Craftsman bungalows.

It was only later when the wartime crisis receded and the Rainier Valley started to attract more residents that the implications of the design and siting decisions of the early Forties became clear.

II. 1946 - 1970 - Deciding the Fate of Wartime Housing

Defense Housing Winds Down

Soon after the war ended in 1945, in a move that presaged the shift from government dormitories to conventional housing projects, electric meters were installed at Rainier Vista and Holly Park to track utility usage. The war mobilization was winding down: servicemen were returning from overseas, industry was re-tooling, veterans and their families were deciding where to settle down. It was only a matter of time before the temporary housing was torn down and the future of permanent housing was settled.

Occupancy at Rainier Vista and Holly Park was limited to veterans, servicemen, and their families. Because of the low turnover and long waiting list, the requirement of a year’s residence in temporary public housing was added in 1947. The start of the Korean War in 1950 helped to sustain veteran and serviceman demand through the mid-Fifties. As of 1951, 5,711 families were still living in the SHA temporary war housing.

In 1949, the Seattle Housing Authority housed 22,392 people, or 5% of Seattle’s population (SHA, 1999 Annual Report). In 1950, of the 2,700 units spread between the three permanent Lanham Act projects--Rainier Vista, Holly Park, and High Point in West Seattle--2,689 were occupied.

According to an SHA study from the time, 86.8% of the residents were white, 11.3% were black, and 1.9% were other races. The 1950 census found that the population of Southeast Seattle was 95% white, 3% black, and 2% “other race.” The study also found that, on average, the families living there were larger and younger than those in Seattle as a whole.

The families who lived in the Lanham projects in 1949 were solidly middle-class, earning a median income slightly higher than that of Seattle families as a whole. Black families living there earned a median income 20% less than their white counterparts.

In April of that year, the SHA stopped renting out units at the temporary projects when they became vacant. The demolition of the temporary projects was complete by 1956. The contractor in charge of demolition had a “used house lot” on Rainier Avenue where it sold complete two-

bedroom houses from the Duwamish Bend and Cedar Vale projects for \$495 a piece.

In 1952, for the first time since they were built, rents at the projects increased by 10-20 percent in order to bring them into line with the rents at similar private sector housing. The new rents ranged from \$26.75 for the smallest units to \$51 at the high end.

New eligibility requirements came into effect at the permanent projects. Any family with income of less than \$3,600 yearly could apply, though veterans and families transferring from temporary projects were given preference. Little-by-little, before it was a legal fact, the wartime defense worker housing was becoming public low-income housing.

The Decision

In November of 1948, the Seattle City Council asked federal housing authorities not to sell the permanent Lanham projects to private interests, but to hold them for use as low-income public housing. The terms of the Housing Act of 1949 passed by Congress allowed the projects to be turned over to the local housing authorities at no cost, provided that it would remain low-income housing for a minimum of 40 years.

Opposition to government housing projects had been constant since the Seattle Housing Authority came into being. A group called The Seattle Committee for Home Protection ran a newspaper ad in the run-up to the 1950 election warning that building new public housing “destroys individual initiative, and undermines a basic foundation of our society -- the integrity and dignity of private home ownership.”

The Seattle Chamber of Commerce and other prominent business groups urged a no vote. Instead, they favored the three permanent wartime projects being converted to low-income housing. The referendum on the SHA’s plan was defeated by a margin of 3 to 1. By defeating the SHA’s bid to build new public housing, Refendum 3 was effectively a vote for continuing to concentrate public housing in southeast Seattle.

SHA met the demand for public housing by acquiring the 1,300 units of the Highpoint project in addition to Rainier Vista and Holly Park. By June of 1953, when the SHA took possession of the Rainier Vista, Holly Park, and High Point projects, their 2,700 units had housed 10,691 families during the course of the war. In the year prior, 1,072 of the families moved out of the projects and 469 had purchased homes. Another 244 rented private housing and 215 families moved to other cities. (ST 6/7/53pg30)

The federal government handed over the projects at no cost and without operating subsidies. The new income limits set for occupancy at the projects (\$2,875 per year for a two-person family, \$3,375 for a three- or four-person family, and \$3,750 for a family of five or more) would have excluded the great majority of the residents living there in 1950.

The most striking finding of the 1950 survey of the three permanent housing projects was how many children and how few older people were housed there compared to Seattle as a whole-- 20% of the project’s population, and only 11% of Seattle’s, was under five years old. Similarly, 2.1% of the project’s population, and 13.2% of Seattle’s, was 60 and over.

The Lanham Act housing was built for two-parent families with one or two children, but growth in demand for public housing was in single bedroom and multi-bedroom, large-family housing. At

the time, according to an SHA history, “in the entire program of 3,568 units the Authority had only 19 four bedroom units, all at Yesler Terrace. A conversion program was initiated in 1955, upping the total supply to 119 by the end of 1969.”

After the upheaval of World War II, the outlines of a new social reality in Seattle were taking shape in the Sixties. Low income housing would be concentrated in South Seattle and particularly in the Rainier Valley. As would become clear in the next decade, the existing projects were inadequate to meet the city’s vast and changing housing needs.

III. 1970 - 1995 - The making of “severely distressed public housing”

Economic Decline and Demographic Transition

Though originally built as separate, self-contained communities, in the 1970s and 80s the SHA’s housing projects came to dominate the Rainier Valley in ways housing officials did not intend. The interlinked crises of the American city -- school desegregation, white flight, the crack epidemic -- unfolded vividly in the Rainier Valley and all were bound up in the fate of Seattle’s public housing.

The stretch of Interstate 5 running parallel to the Rainier Valley, completed in 1967, had the effect of rerouting traffic around Rainier Avenue, which until then had been a primary route to and from points south of the city. The rise of suburban Renton as a population center and the opening of Southcenter Mall just south of the city limits in 1968 increased Southeast Seattle’s economic isolation.

The Central Area, the historic center of Seattle’s African-American community, faced a crisis of its own. Adjacent to downtown, coveted as a site for freeway expansion and redevelopment under federal “urban renewal” funding, as with Profanity Hill before it, the houses of the Central Area were thought better cleared from the map. For years it had been Seattle’s official policy to exempt the Central Area from building inspections, catering to slumlords and pushing an aging housing stock to deteriorate to the point of crisis.

Restrictive covenants in other parts of Seattle prevented African Americans from moving in, and the practice of “redlining” effectively prevented those who owned property in the Central Area from improving it. As large swaths of inexpensive housing were demolished and thousands of residents displaced, people living in the Central Area looked southward to the Rainier Valley.

Census data shows a dramatic change in the racial composition of Rainier Valley from 1960 to 1970. While the total number of residents held steady, the percentage of whites decreased from 88% to 69% while that of African Americans and Asians rose, from 4% to 14% and from 9% to 17% respectively.

The change in the area around the Holly Park project was even more stark. From 1960 to 1970, more than 40% of the white population moved away. And while the total number of housing units there was virtually unchanged, vacant units jumped from 5% to 17% over the course of the decade. Holly Park itself was 42% white, 48% black, and 10% “other” (this group was primarily Asian, with Latinos and Native Americans also included). The trend was similar in the area of Rainier Vista, with the number of whites shrinking by about 30%, the black population tripling, and Asian population almost doubling.

Following the cancellation of a major defense contract in 1970, the Boeing Company laid off almost two thirds of its workforce by the end of 1971. Seattle suffered high unemployment well into the 1970s. During Boeing's hiring surges in the mid-'50s and late-'60s, the Rainier Valley had maintained its role as dormitory for aerospace industry workers, and residential construction had boomed. But in the wake of the massive Boeing layoffs, there was a 20% apartment vacancy rate, almost twice that of the rest of Seattle. As one *Seattle Times* reporter put it at the time, "The jobs were no longer in the Southeast, but the unemployed were."

The Convergence of Density and Crime

Subsidized housing had continued to be built in Southeast Seattle after Rainier Vista and Holly Park were converted because there was already a market for such housing there, there was no determined resistance to it, and, relative to the rest of Seattle, land was cheap.

Federal programs designed to spur private low income housing development in the 1960s and '70s featured cost ceilings that rewarded construction where land costs were lowest. The presence of low income housing, in turn, held down local real estate prices, encouraging yet more subsidized multi-family rental housing to be developed in the area. Other factors, like the presence of low-income-focused social service agencies, and the perceived undesirability of real estate in the area of subsidized housing, tended to reinforce the low income ecosystem.

In 1971 the Rainier Chamber of Commerce published a study showing that the Southeast District, one of 12 roughly equally sized city districts, had almost as many low income housing units as the other 11 combined, which they decried as "an inequality and not in keeping with any rational urban planning strategy."

Starting in the 1970's, crime in the Rainier Valley ratcheted up to a level that residents could not ignore. In the census tracts around Rainier Vista and Holly Park, reported incidents of burglary and theft doubled from 1960 to 1970 and stayed high through the 1990s. Accounts of purse snatchings, residential break-ins, and businesses closed down under the financial hardship of repeated robberies were common. In 1989, the SPD estimated that 1,400 crack houses were in operation in the Rainier Valley.

As crime increased, neighborhood resistance to further concentration of low income housing began to coalesce. The belief, held by many homeowners and renters alike, was that the high density of people -- particularly of single mothers with multiple children -- residing in a single area with inadequate access to employment centers, health facilities, and playgrounds, naturally led to crime. Longtime Rainier Valley residents saw their neighborhoods, which had been dominated by modest single family homes, changing irrevocably.

Before Holly Park was built, for example, there were about 300 houses on the 108 acre site. When it was finished in 1942, Holly Park had 896 units--about eight units per acre. In 1970, two apartment complexes were built adjacent to Holly Park that had between them 378 units at a density of 44 units per acre. As recently as 1964, there had been only seven houses on that eleven-acre site.

Due to poor design and indifferent management, many subsidized housing complexes around the Rainier Valley were overrun by crime and neglect. Since federal housing policy had promoted the concentration of low income housing in the Rainier Valley --which to neighborhood

activists amounted to a kind of segregation -- a decade of signature-gathering, lobbying, and street protests went into changing it.

Attempts to Fix Low Income Housing

As of 1991, Rainier Vista housed 1,210 people in 496 units (this number was reduced as social service agencies took over housing units. In 1999, 481 were occupied by low income residents). Of these, 448 were African Americans, 447 were Asian/Pacific Islanders, and 193 were white. At Holly Park, there were 2,296 residents living in 898 units--832 were African Americans, 816 were Asians and Pacific Islanders, 305 were white.

Starting in the mid-'70s the SHA began to at least rhetorically address the problem of housing segregation. "The primary motivation behind current HUD policy," said a 1976 SHA study, "is the desire to give the poor the opportunity of raising their children in middle income communities."

In reality, policy changes came in the wake of a 1969 court ruling against the Chicago Housing Authority and the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, which determined that the two had promoted segregation by siting public housing in minority neighborhoods.

After the Gautreaux decision, the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development began to promote programs that gave low-income residents more geographic mobility and choice in housing. In 1974 the federal Section 8 program was introduced, allowing federal funding for low-income people to rent their own units on the private market. The purpose of the program was to give the poor a choice of neighborhoods rather than being forced by prices into low-cost areas.

In 1978, in response to calls from Rainier Valley residents for low income housing to be dispersed throughout the city, the SHA launched the Scattered Site Family Housing Program, which allowed low income families the opportunity to live in different parts of the city and consequently relieve areas where low-income housing was concentrated.

From dense housing where construction, maintenance, and service costs could be kept low, to a model where low-income people were scattered in individual houses, duplexes and small apartments, was a big philosophical leap. Since Seattle's first experiment with public housing at Yesler Terrace, housing officials have been attentive to the ways the environment they create can positively influence residents. In this vein, the SHA's 1980 Annual Report describes a woman who lived at Holly Park until May 1980, when "she transferred to a scattered-site unit and the move has turned her life around." It was a measure of just how far the "garden communities" had fallen that the SHA itself was touting the benefits of moving away from them.

By 1990, Rainier Vista and especially Holly Park were showing wear. Their housing had already existed for ten years longer than the forty years it was designed to last, and millions of dollars had been invested in modernizing and maintaining them.

In 1974, a "target hardening" program which included upgrades to solid-core doors, improved locks, window glass and wall construction was instituted to improve building security. In 1980, Rainier Vista underwent a modernization project, which included new insulation, kitchens, bathrooms, electrical wiring, and plumbing. Over the years, siding, roofs, and heating systems among other basics had been replaced as well.

A 1992 community workshop on possibilities for renovating the SHA's housing projects found that Holly Park and Rainier Vista had inadequate, dilapidated facilities for service agencies housed there and had impractically sprawling layouts on territory staked out by gangs.

Once thought to be a benefit, the suburban privacy and open space at Rainier Vista and Holly Park offered by the curvilinear street plan were now seen as important contributors to the problems there.

Many different approaches were used in an attempt to fix the problems at Rainier Vista and Holly Park -- new policing strategies, street lighting, and even a play field. "The things we are trying to combat with this field are gangs and drugs,' the official in charge of the project declared in 1993. 'We know team sports offer the things that gang members say are important to them, like belonging and a sense of camaraderie.'"

In order to address these conditions, and to take advantage of new federal redevelopment funds, the SHA began in the early '90s to emphasize the dysfunction at Rainier Vista and Holly Park, and the obsolescence of the facilities there. They conducted studies and actively campaigned for them to be certified as "severely distressed public housing."

IV. 1995 - Present - The Promise of HOPE VI

In 1992, Congress created a new federal housing program called Homeownership and Opportunity for People Everywhere, or HOPE VI. The SHA's 1997 Annual Report explained that the purpose of HOPE VI was "to eliminate the nation's massive and aging low-income housing ghettos, which -- with the very best intentions -- have isolated the poor into concentrated enclaves." More than a new source of funds, the program was a dramatic change in the assumptions about how housing projects should be built.

Starting in 1993, the SHA began lining up support for an application to redevelop Holly Park, which was by general agreement the worst of the four large projects under its purview. The Federal Department of Housing and Urban Development awarded a \$48.1 million HOPE VI grant for the project in 1995. The City of Seattle contributed 6.3 million to the project, to which another \$110 million in private investment was added.

Instead of using an outside developer, the SHA took on the role itself, directing the design of the housing by providing specific guidelines to builders. Construction began in 1998 and was completed in three phases. By the end of 1999, Phase 1 rental housing was built and fully occupied and the NewHolly branch of the Seattle Public Library opened.

In 2001, Phase 2 construction was complete, including a 318-unit Elder Village made up of several related complexes that provide services geared toward the senior citizens who live there.

When work on the market rate housing of Phase 3 was finished in 2005, three private builders--Bennett-Sherman, Polygon Northwest, and Family Pryde Homes--had built between them about 180 homes. Renamed "NewHolly," the new project is a mix of single-family residences, duplexes, townhouses, multiplex units, and flats that total 1,433 units. Roughly a third is available to very low income residents, another third to those who make just below Seattle's

median income, and a third is market rate houses.

In August of 1999, \$35 million in HOPE VI funds were committed to the redevelopment of Rainier Vista, along with \$14.4 million in Federal stimulus money. The project has since attracted nearly \$200 million in investment from other sources.

In 2003, demolition of the original housing on the west side of Martin Luther King Jr. Way was completed and by the end of 2004, 22 rental units were built and occupied. In Phase 1, 180 lots were sold to private builders to build homes for sale, with the SHA providing design guidelines.

Also, AIDS Housing of Washington collaborated with SHA to build 50 units of affordable housing, half of which are set aside for residents with disabilities. Gamelin House, a residence for older adults developed in partnership with Providence Health Systems, was also completed in Phase 1.

In the heart of the development, Neighborhood House constructed a community services center. In 2008, the Rainier Vista Boys & Girls Club opened a 40,000 square foot facility on the east side of the development that features classrooms, a gym, a computer lab, and a game room, among other amenities.

Originally slated to be finished in the spring of 2008, Phase 2 construction at the 15 acres on the east side of Martin Luther King Jr. Way has been delayed because of funding problems.

Features Of Hope VI Redevelopment:

Integrated with surrounding community

As in the past, the idea that housing authorities could design the built environment to shape and direct the behavior of project residents was a major underpinning of HOPE VI. It was a common observation that at Holly Park and Rainier Vista, “the low one-story, barracks-like buildings are randomly placed on an internal circular, meandering road system, offering residents little privacy and creating large areas of indefensible space and an environment for illegal and antisocial behavior.”

To address this, streets were reconfigured into “a conventional grid design, blended the scale with the surrounding neighborhoods, and accommodated parking in side-yard aprons and in rear-yard garages in order to reduce vandalism and congregation of youths in parking lots.”

At Rainier Vista the color schemes, mix of materials, and overall design of the dwellings are meant to evoke the predominant residential style in the Rainier Valley--the Craftsman house. Street-level retail along the outer edge of the project adds to the walkable neighborhood feel. At both developments, from block to block, the buildings vary in color, design, and height, giving the feel of an eclectic neighborhood that sprung up organically over time.

Emphasis on Self-sufficiency

Flattening the old projects and starting over allowed housing officials the opportunity to pick and choose who would live there. The idea was that instead of merely providing shelter, the public housing environment would match motivated people with services that would help them get an

education, buy a house, and start a career.

To this end, organizations like Neighborhood House, Refugee Women's Alliance, and East African Community Services provide a variety of services including computer classes, after-school tutoring, job placement services, and child care.

The construction firms that built NewHolly and Rainier Vista committed to hiring a certain percentage of workers from the resident population. Habitat for Humanity, a non-profit developer, helped many families move into houses they helped to build at NewHolly and Rainier Vista.

In 2000, the SHA reported that “the average personal income of residents in public housing at Holly Park grew dramatically while crime dropped by 64 percent over a three-year period” and “the number of working adults living at NewHolly increased by 214 percent due to job training and NewHolly leasing policies that stress self-sufficiency.”

Mixed-income, with Decreased Concentration of Low-income Residents

The most remarkable change brought about by HOPE VI at New Holly and Rainier Vista is that they can no longer plausibly be called ghettos. According to the SHA official in charge of the NewHolly redevelopment, the goal was that “when it's all finished you'll drive through that area and you won't be able to tell what's low-income housing and what isn't.”

Both developments substantially increase the density of housing, while also dramatically increasing the income diversity of residents. Both sites combine rental housing at different subsidy levels with hundreds of market-rate townhomes and single family homes.

There is a large immigrant population at the two housing projects. At the beginning of 2009, an SHA employee estimated that the next 500 people on the waiting list to live NewHolly were Somali. There is a substantial Asian population as well, with families from Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos.

One-for-one replacement

When Seattle built its first public housing at Yesler Terrace in 1940, the SHA was required to eliminate one unit of substandard housing for every one built. Today, the logic of redevelopment is inverted -- under pressure from the City Council and housing activists, the SHA is committed to stringent terms for replacing each low income unit displaced by the HOPE VI redevelopment projects.

From the SHA's perspective, the economics of redevelopment required that the new housing be balanced more toward higher income residents. At a 2001 hearing, a housing official contended that those who demand strict one-to-one replacement are effectively saying SHA “must revive the housing stock and become bankrupt.”

NewHolly added an additional 550 units as a result of the redevelopment, even as the number of low income units on site shrunk by more than 300. The Rainier Vista revitalization plan calls for living units on the 65 acre site to increase by 400, from the original 481, though the total number of low income units (defined as households that earn less than 30% of area median income) will shrink by about 70.

In both cases, the Seattle Housing Authority's plans called for many low income units to be replaced elsewhere using potentially unstable funding sources that are less certain to remain low income housing than dedicated units at the HOPE VI projects. In the case of NewHolly, after being pressed on its replacement plan, the SHA ultimately signed a memorandum of understanding with the City of Seattle, specifying the agreed-upon terms by which the 871 units of low income housing at the old project would be replaced.

The initial replacement plan for the new Rainier Vista development was met with opposition by some tenants, housing activists, and local politicians, primarily because it proposed reducing the number of units for very low income residents by half, while nearly doubling the total number of units. In 2002, the Seattle Displacement Coalition and Friends of Rainier Vista won a lawsuit against the SHA that required the agency to balance Phase 2 of the project more toward low-income housing than had been originally planned.

According to the SHA, Rainier Vista will house 410 of the original 481 low income units that existed there before the redevelopment. The remaining 71 will be replaced off-site, in buildings owned by Seattle Housing Authority, or in partnership with another housing provider.

The Arc of a Pendulum

In 1942, Jesse Epstein, the SHA's first director, appeared for a grilling before Seattle's Municipal Board of Public Works. They demanded to know why "individual home projects" were being built in Portland, Oregon, while Seattle built multi-unit structures like Yesler Terrace which had been criticized since their construction. Epstein replied that "the Housing Authority has lined up considerable South End property on which individual home projects can be constructed on improved streets."

Though it would be another forty years before "individual home projects" materialized, Epstein's point was clear -- future public housing would be constructed in South Seattle, a safe distance from the city center. With this bargain, which was reinforced both by conscious policy decisions and market forces, accommodating public housing became a neighborhood problem more than a city problem in the decades that followed.

In Seattle, which is by tradition a middle class "city of houses," dense multi-family housing has often been seen as the root of urban disorder. Proponents of this view look no further than the Rainier Valley's housing projects. Today, low income housing is dispersed throughout the city, but the Rainier Valley is still the home of a disproportionate amount of it. In 2009, southeast Seattle accounted for 10.6% of Seattle's total housing but contained almost 20% of the city's subsidized housing.

The novelty of the federal HOPE VI housing program is that it combines high density development with the goal of de-concentrating poverty. In the NewHolly neighborhood, housing density increased dramatically with the HOPE VI redevelopment and new multifamily housing continues to be built there, yet crime is down to pre-1970 levels.

And with the shift in the assumptions, the push and pull of activists and housing officials has flipped polarity, with the SHA committed to integrating the low income population with other income groups and low income housing activists demanding that existing concentrations of low income residents be maintained.

On August 10, 2009, ground was broken on Tamarack Place, the first housing in Phase II of the Rainier Vista redevelopment, which will include 83 units of low income housing and 10,000 square feet of retail space. Opponents of the HOPE VI project remain skeptical that the SHA will abide by its commitment to replace all the low income housing that existed in the original development.

If a metaphor is to be found in the history of Seattle's public housing, it would be the swinging pendulum. Through the years, housing officials have consistently acted with an eye toward the future. Each new housing initiative they have undertaken has brought the promise of order and renewal, but as often as they have solved one problem, another is created.

"Slums" cleared in the Fifties cast Seattle residents to the wind and many blocks leveled in those days remain vacant. Concentrating low income tenants in one area ostensibly reduced the cost of construction, maintenance, and service provision, but it ended up taxing resources in an under-served area of the city to the breaking point. The Scattered Sites program admirably achieved the goal of housing people in neighborhoods across the city, but the single-family homes and duplexes were expensive to maintain and created a new kind of isolation for residents in neighborhoods distant from the services they rely on.

Now with the ascendancy of HOPE VI, the pendulum has swung back toward dense public housing development, which has manifestly improved the stability of the Rainier Valley's neighborhoods and played a role in reducing area crime. But, whatever strides are made in solving the problems of the last generation of public housing, the one thing that is certain in history is that new ones will emerge to replace them.

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