Homelessness in America
Using Public Land for Affordable Housing
The Missing Middle-Income Housing
In the 1960s, the term public housing became synonymous in many parts of the country with violence, urban blight and decay. The notorious Cabrini-Green project on Chicago’s Near North Side, once home to 15,000 people living in mid- and high-rise apartments, was relatively isolated from the surrounding community and plagued by drugs and gang warfare.

In the 1990s, Cabrini Green was entirely demolished and replaced with mixed-income housing under HUD’s HOPE VI based on a New Urbanism model, with some units reserved for public housing. Since the inception of the HOPE VI program in 1993 and its demise in 2010, more than 260 grants awarded around the country form a total of roughly $6.2 billion. The grants were used to demolish 96,200 public housing units and build 107,800 new or renovated housing units, of which 56,800 were to be affordable to the lowest-income households. The new and renovated buildings were designed to be less dense.

Following in its footsteps, HUD’s Choice Neighborhoods Initiative (CNI) is building on HOPE VI, leveraging smaller grants to improve not only blighted projects, but the surrounding neighborhoods. During fiscal year 2016, CNI had a budget of $125 million. For the 2017 fiscal year, President Obama has requested $200 million from Congress, an increase of $75 million.

HUD officials say CNI uses a comprehensive approach that involves local leaders, residents and other stakeholders, such as public housing authorities, cities, schools, police, business owners, nonprofits and private developers — who are required to come up with a Transformation Plan.

CNI also ensures, they say, that current public and assisted housing residents will be able to benefit from this transformation by preserving affordable housing or providing residents with the choice to move to affordable and accessible housing in other neighborhoods.
Brian Sullivan, a HUD spokesman, said HOPE VI was responsible for “many of the nation’s oldest and most decrepit housing developments falling to the wrecking ball, not only Cabrini Green, but Robert Taylor Homes in Chicago as well.”

Built to provide affordable housing, Taylor Homes was at one point the nation’s biggest public housing project, consisting of 28 high-rise buildings of 16 stories each — with more than 4,400 units — that stretched for two miles. Designed for 11,000 residents, this development housed as many as 27,000 people. Like Cabrini Green, it has been replaced by a mixed-income neighborhood.

“Suffice it to say these public housing projects had national reputations. Certainly in their own communities, they were seen as a failed approach about how to house what were in some cases extremely poor families.

“Choice Neighborhoods is an outgrowth of the HOPE VI, which was a way to help public housing authorities around the country deal with severely distressed public housing stocks that were located in parts of their cities that had very few opportunities for anything as simple and basic as a grocery store. So as a consequence, you saw generations of poverty and everything that comes from that.”

Sullivan said the old model of replacing dense public housing units on a one-to-one basis only “perpetuated the model where you were concentrating very poor and extremely poor families in these isolated pockets of poverty.

“That one-to-one approach ended and allowed for HOPE VI to come about as a different model to help public housing authorities replace these developments and build mixed-income neighborhoods.”

Launched by the Obama administration in 2009, he said the aim of Choice Neighborhoods is to “deconcentrate pockets of poverty and transform them into multi-income neighborhoods that work because they have transportation, schools, grocery stores and other amenities. You want neighborhoods to function in all ways, not just have new housing. Nice housing with no transportation and lousy schools isn’t going to do it. You need all the pieces that are part of the wider neighborhood.”

He said Chicago Housing Authority developments are now far less densely concentrated mixed-income neighborhoods that are “a more vital part of the fabric of the surrounding neighborhood and community. They have better transportation options, grocery stores, libraries and schools.”

He described Choice Neighborhoods as a “vehicle to do that very thing more broadly, not just to include public housing, but all the other facets. Unfortunately CNI is limited by the appropriated funds, so it has only touched a number of places.

“But what it has tended to do is bring other agencies on board. We have funded planning grants to support local communities and how they might plan for a neighborhood-wide redevelopment and then larger implementation grants.”

The Saltash HOPE VI revitalization in Tacoma, Wash., is a residential and commercial transformation of a housing project that was originally built during WWII for soldiers and civilians.

Photos courtesy of Tarti Galles and Partners, Inc.
In the Boston neighborhood of Dorchester, he said a $20.5 million CNI grant was leveraged to bring in another $43 million in public and private funds for a total of $64 million. Similarly, HUD provided $30 million for a public housing project in Chicago’s Woodlawn neighborhood that stimulated another $134 million in investments.

“These days, public funds are probably not going to get it all done, so as a requirement, we expect successful grant applicants to come to the table with other leveraged sources, whether it is San Antonio, Texas, New Orleans or Seattle. They’ve all got to have some skin in the game.”

In San Francisco, the impoverished Alice Griffith neighborhood is being redeveloped with the help of a CNI grant. This barracks-style public housing project is on Candlestick Point and includes part of the old Candlestick Park, which the San Francisco Giants baseball team and San Francisco 49ers football team once played. It was torn down in 2015. McCormick Baron Salazar, a leading real estate development firm that specializes in economically integrated urban neighborhoods, is managing the redevelopment, while Torri Gallas and Partners architectural firm, is designing it. The San Francisco Housing Authority owns the land.

Neal Payton, a partner with Torri Gallas in Los Angeles, said the larger area surrounding Alice Griffith has shipping and light industrial activity. He said the first three blocks of the redevelopment were built without any impact on the existing neighborhood so that residents of current public housing were able to move once.

Payton said the design process started three years ago with two blocks now finished and more being constructed. One block, he said, is walk-up townhouses, while the other is an apartment complex built around a courtyard. Because the old sports stadium is gone and the huge parking lot is available, he said the neighborhood will be densifying and four times as much housing will be built in the area compared to what was in the 333-building, two-story Alice Griffith project — most of which was built in 1963.

“The new buildings will not feel isolated like the existing project, which is not just two-story barracks but enclosed and almost gated off from the rest of the neighborhood,” he said. “There is only one-way in and out, so it really does feel almost isolated.”

Though the cul de sac and non-through streets were initially designed to slow traffic and protect kids, Lavelle Shaw, the Alice Griffith Tenants Association president, said that street pattern cut off residents from public transit and businesses, making it something of an island.

“We were a lost city, always forgotten, always left out,” he told a reporter when ground was broken for the first homes last year.
Payton said the new design "flips that old pattern on its head and makes the new development an extension of San Francisco’s existing street network. The new housing will fill in some of the existing blocks and look like just normal buildings that you’d find anywhere in San Fran. "You won’t be able to distinguish in any way that this is affordable housing. There is also a big central park planned for this quadrant and that will help frame this development. Later, market-rate housing will do the same.”

Payton said he likes the CNI philosophy because “it’s a way that HUD is supporting the reanimation and revitalization of certain urban areas that have been neglected over the years — sometimes unintentionally, sometimes intentionally. It does this in a way that supports public housing for folks who need it, but at the same time puts that housing in an environment that is mixed with other people so the poor aren’t concentrated in one area. I think that’s a better way to rebuild parts of a city from a social point of view.

“This is good because it goes beyond HOPE VI. It’s concerned with more than just the ‘bricks and sticks’ component. It seeks to create partnerships with other elements of the community to improve education, policing, economic activity, transportation and the like so that the communities that are awarded funds really have to have their acts together. They must have a far-reaching vision and program to improve all those aspects of urban life. That’s pretty healthy.

“What I don’t like is that there’s not enough money for Choice Neighborhoods. The amount of need vs. the available funding. Simply put, we need a lot more.”

Milwaukee’s Westlawn public housing project is also undergoing a major transformation. Located on 75 acres on the northwest side of the city, the $82-million dollar overstarted six years ago with the demolition of nearly half of 725 distressed, 1940s-style barracks. They have been replaced with 250 units made up mostly of townhouses and multifamily apartments that were built to LEED standards. The development also included a three-quarter-acre community gardenler. The first half of the project was paid for in part with a Wisconsin Economic Development Corporation grant and opened in 2013 to positive reviews.

Bill Fears, a project manager for the Torti Gallas architectural firm — which designed the first half of the effort — said the team redeveloping the second phase of Westlawn has received a $30-million CNI grant for what he called “an almost identical product. Construction should start next year. When finished, it will have a slightly higher density of nearly 1,000 units.

“The biggest issue we had with this development was its isolation from the rest of the community. We’ve reopened four or five new connections into the neighborhood and brought everything up to a similar housing type rather than group-style barracks housing. We took it back to townhouses and small apartment buildings, which is what exists in the nearby neighborhood. So you get a continuity of type.”

Murphy Antoine, a partner with Torti Gallas, said his company has been working with the housing authority in Milwaukee since 2008. He’s seen the approach toward redeveloping impoverished public housing projects evolve with the implementation of Choice Neighborhoods.

“It goes beyond HOPE VI and includes things like having a bigger impact outside the boundaries of the actual housing site. Unfortunately, resources aren’t there to do more of it. There are three, maybe four neighborhood awards given out every year and that is a drop in the bucket to make a difference in the problem.”

CNI seeks to create partnerships with other elements of the community to improve education, policing, economic activity and transportation.
In Yonkers, N.Y., the Cottage Place Gardens public housing complex is also being revitalized with the aid of a CNI grant. Jesse Batus, a senior project manager at The Community Builders, said the project consisted of 256 units in 14 squat, plain, brick, three- and four-story walk-up buildings before the redevelopment began.

Since then, several structures on the site were demolished and replaced by 172 new housing units in two phases of what Batus said will ultimately be a six-phase process. Much of it is affordable housing. So far, Community Builders has received permits from the city to construct 500 units.

“Our partners with the Municipal Housing Authority for the City of Yonkers (MHACY) had done a good job maintaining the development but ultimately it is a distressed public housing project, having been built in 1945 and suffering from systemic capital needs that can’t be addressed through a rehab.

“Beyond that, there were things like outdated layouts and finishes, poor building envelope issues from old windows, doors, and insulation, as well as a lack of amenities. The buildings have outmoded heating systems, a dearth of accessible units and a lack of active outdoor spaces like parks or playgrounds.”

Batus said the development’s campus-style layout created “a sort of disconnection of the development from the rest of the community. There is virtually no street frontage to the development, with the primary points of access from North Broadway and Warburton Avenue virtually hidden from the street. If you don’t know where the development is, you really can’t tell from the main road that 256 families were living back there.”

Batus said a major component of the redesign has been to acquire street parcels along Warburton and Ashburton Avenues, which are major thoroughfares, so the project could be brought back into the community.

“Our goal is for every resident to have a physical address, not to have to say that I live in building #13 at Cottage,” he said.

Though the Ravine neighborhood where the Cottage Place Gardens is located has many vacant and blighted homes, a higher crime rate than the rest of the city and a lack of recreational green space, he said it also “has a lot of promising characteristics that can result in a vibrant neighborhood.”

During the first phase of the Redevelopment, Community Builders and its partners renovated Public School 6 at 43 Ashburton Ave. — across from the Cottage Place Gardens — and reopened it last year as the Schoolhouse Terrace Apartments.

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We have transformed a symbol of neglect and deterioration into a symbol of hope and new opportunity.

Long an eyesore, the school's original, architecturally distinctive archway was preserved and integrated into the design of the 50-unit building for low-income seniors and another 70-unit building designed for low-income families.

At the grand opening ceremony last year, Yonkers mayor Mike Spano praised the effort and said, "We have transformed what stood for years as a symbol of neglect and deterioration into a symbol of hope and new opportunity, providing quality, environmentally sustainable, affordable housing for Yonkers families, seniors and newcomers to our city."

Cottage Place Gardens is close to a rapidly improving waterfront and downtown in which the city has been investing years of time and energy. The neighborhood is also close to mass transit and there are sight lines throughout the neighborhood of the Hudson River and Palisades.

"Most importantly, many long-time stakeholder residents, homeowners, and organizations who have a vested interest in improving the community are here," Batus added. "Together we have been working in concert to address the physical, economic and social challenges in order to turn our vision into reality."

“Our goal in this effort is to create a true mixed-income community which will gradually increase density and mix incomes without displacing long-time residents. Attracting more middle-income families and individuals will generate more capital which can be spent locally. This will spur the economy in the neighborhood, leading to more active and lively storefronts and more jobs for lower-income residents.

Batus said he met scores of people in planning meetings who "have fond memories of going to school here, raising their families here, having fun here. They truly care about what happens in the future, not just for them but for their children. We'll know if this effort was a success if we find the right balance of attracting new families and businesses to join this community while not displacing or alienating those long-time stakeholders."  

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