



# Reframing public housing in Richmond, Virginia: Segregation, resident resistance and the future of redevelopment



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## ABSTRACT

This paper is a three-part assessment of the history of public housing in Richmond, Virginia and an account of current efforts to create a progressive model for public housing redevelopment in the city. Part One provides a short history of Richmond's creation of nearly exclusively African-American public housing in the East End of the city in the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s, and describes a regional context in which virtually all public housing in the entire metropolitan area is located within a central city that is home to just one-sixth of the overall metro population. Part Two provides an account of the Blackwell public housing complex in Richmond under the Hope VI program, beginning in the late 1990s, and an account of the tenant activism that arose in response to the many problems and shortcomings with that project. That activism later resulted in the tenant-led coalition Residents of Public Housing in Richmond Against Mass Evictions (or RePHRAME). Together non-profit and tenant activists in RePHRAME have collaborated over the past several years to challenge redevelopment practices that threaten to diminish the number of public housing units in the city. Part Three is an in-progress report on an effort we are each personally involved in that includes participation by RePHRAME members as well as several community organizations and leaders that have been part of the RePHRAME coalition: to create a new resident-driven, progressive redevelopment process for the city. This process aims to build consensus among city policymakers and many tenants that redevelopment of the city's highly concentrated public housing units for the sake of improving opportunities and living conditions for residents is a moral imperative. Recognizing and articulating the history of segregation, mismanagement, and deep distrust between residents and public authorities, this process takes seriously the deep-seated and legitimate concerns of tenants with the aim of assuring much more positive outcomes in future redevelopment processes.

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## 1. Introduction

Over one hundred and fifty years after the end of the Civil War in the United States, Richmond, Virginia continues to bear both the label and the burden of the “Capital of the Confederacy.” Racial segregation—inscribed through policies and practices throughout the 19th and 20th centuries—shows up both in the historical sites and tours from the Slave Trail, American Civil War Center, and Valentine History Center's exhibit of sit-ins during the Civil Rights Movement—and in the persistent location and lived experience of African American public housing residents. Like Baltimore (R. Williams, 2004), Chicago and Atlanta (Vale, 2013), among other cities, Richmond leaders in the mid-twentieth century built and maintained segregated public housing. In Richmond, this resulted in the construction of low-rise public housing concentrated primarily in one area of the city (the East End) and

housing nearly exclusively African Americans. In a regional context in which virtually all public housing in the entire metropolitan area is located within the landlocked central city and the city and surrounding counties operate under separate governments, Richmond adopted a recipe virtually guaranteeing the generational perpetuation of extreme poverty. Richmond's current child poverty rate is 39%—rising to as high as 75% in the five census tracts comprising the core of the East End. This concentration of racialized poverty, combined with neglect by the city and missteps by the Richmond Redevelopment Housing Authority (RRHA) on Richmond's only HOPE (Housing Opportunities for People Everywhere) VI grant in the 1990s, created isolated and neglected public housing communities and bred deep tenant distrust of the RRHA.

In the face of these overwhelming challenges, public housing resident activism emerged in 2008 in response to redevelopment plans for Gilpin Court, the oldest public housing development in Richmond. Like public housing tenants in Baltimore (R. Williams, 2004), Chicago (Feldman & Stall, 2004), and San Francisco (Howard, 2014) who forged community bonds and employed a range of formal and informal practices to challenge the state to improve public housing, public housing residents in Richmond joined with non-profit and citizen allies to fight

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against mass eviction, displacement, and reduced public housing units. Even after the redevelopment plans for Gilpin Court stalled, residents from across different public housing communities continued to advocate for infrastructure and policy improvements and one-for-one replacement of public housing units in future redevelopments. These efforts have been largely successful in persuading RRHA and city leadership of the critical importance of engaging and empowering residents as partners in redevelopment processes, and hence have helped create a more inclusive paradigm for redevelopment work. The coalition's sustained activism during the RRHA's shuffling of redevelopment priorities and continued focus on Richmond's troubled history demonstrate the ways in which racial and spatial history can inform current debates and fuel activism around public housing redevelopment.

This article provides a brief historical overview of public housing's role in the political economy of racially stratified Richmond. Particular attention is given to a case study of the Blackwell HOPE VI project, whose well-publicized difficulties cast a long shadow over current redevelopment debates in Richmond. The following section, drawing on interviews with resident leaders as well as participant observation, documents the emergence of a vocal and increasingly effective resident organization in the 2000s that formed a community-wide coalition to challenge redevelopment proposals that did not guarantee one-for-one replacement of housing units. Some of these leaders in turn helped shape the City's comprehensive poverty reduction initiative—the Maggie L. Walker Initiative for Expanding Opportunity and Fighting Poverty. While many questions remain about the capacity of the RRHA and the city to fulfill stated commitments to pursue future redevelopment in ways that engage all residents and leave no resident worse off, this civic activism has played a key role in altering the policy paradigm in Richmond.

## 2. Framing public housing in the early years

The RRHA was formed in 1940, amidst a local political climate that was largely hostile to subsidized housing of any kind, let alone high-quality, racially integrated public housing. When Virginia passed enabling legislation for public housing authorities in 1939, cities such as Alexandria and Newport News moved quickly to take advantage of federal funds to eliminate slums and develop public housing ([\\$2,000,000 in federal funds available here for housing, July 20, 1949](#)). Richmond delayed. Ideological opposition to seeking federal aid during the Depression, combined with deep fears of black residents influx into white neighborhoods, created a shaky foundation for the creation of public housing in the state's capital. While the city government had shown some support for private-public housing plans in the 1930s, federally subsidized public housing sparked opposition. Mayor J. Fulmer Bright, in office since 1924, argued that creating a Housing Authority “violates every principle of sound business, democracy, Americanism, individualism, and other fine traits” (Silver, 1984, p. 147). Bright worried about the long-term impact of public housing: “I believe that these very Federal housing projects, now being constructed to relieve the ills of which we complain, will in themselves constitute the slums of the next generation, 20 years hence” (Silver, 1984, p. 147). Fearful that public housing would push out families who could not afford the rent payments and would create a “preferred class of citizens,” Bright vetoed the City Council's narrow vote to form a public housing authority (Silver, 1984, p. 147). The mayor's non-interventionist approach to development cost him the 1940 election. Gordon B. Ambler, a supporter of slum clearance, public housing, and annexation took office as mayor and the Richmond Redevelopment and Housing Authority (RRHA) was formed in 1940.

## 3. Constructing segregation

During its first two decades, the RRHA, in conjunction with city government, created a public housing program that reinforced the racial

and spatial segregation solidified in the first three decades of the twentieth century by Jim Crow, redlining, and short-lived attempts at race-based zoning.<sup>2</sup> With federal funds in place, the RRHA designated the first 297 units of federally subsidized public housing units “for Negroes” ([Negro housing project named Gilpin Court, June 20, 1941](#)). Built in 1942 in Jackson Ward, an African American community once known as the “Harlem of the South”, the slum clearance project held out the promise of ameliorating high death, crime, delinquency, and tuberculosis rates in the 9.6 acre tract ([USHA awards city's housing \\$750,000 more, February 28, 1941](#)). The opening of Gilpin Court was the first of many urban development and urban renewal projects that drastically altered African American neighborhoods in Richmond. Notably, only 25 of the 576 applications for Gilpin Court came from families who had previously lived in the cleared area (Campbell, 2012).

World War II and Richmond politics delayed the expansion of the public housing program even after the passage of the federal Housing Act of 1949 offered significant funding opportunities for low-rent housing. While the federal government earmarked two million dollars for two additional public housing projects in July 1949, the Richmond City Council debated both the need for the units and the reliance on federal money. Polarized citizens stormed Council chambers presenting “vehement arguments for and against public housing” and ultimately stalling the creation of much-needed affordable housing ([U.S. housing plan survey argued here, October 27, 1949](#), p. 1). City Council finally approved the RRHA's request and \$1,312,080 in federal funding in February 1950, setting in motion the development of 504 units for African American families in the East End at Creighton Court, and 402 units for white families in the Southside at Hillside Court ([Slum work is endorsed by council, February 28, 1950](#), p. 1). Acknowledging that both locations were distant from the city center, the RRHA and Planning Commission shortsightedly noted, “transportation and accessibility to schools would offer minor problems” ([Plan board selects sites for housing, August, 23, 1950](#), p. 1). Opened in 1952, the projects' segregation by race and location signaled the entrenchment of segregation in Richmond public housing. Future public housing development primarily was spatially and racially concentrated in the East End as housing solely for low-income African Americans. This intentional segregation weakened the public housing program and eroded tenant opportunity.

Over the next decade, urban renewal, highly contested highway construction, and urban redevelopment plans solidified a pattern of displacement of African Americans from traditional neighborhoods in the city. Between 1955 and 1957, more than 7000 people—10% of the city's black population—were displaced by the creation of the Richmond-Petersburg Expressway and Belvidere Street extension. Thousands more lost their homes (in the 1960s) due to the construction of the Downtown Expressway (Silver, 1984). By the end of the 1950s, the city had destroyed 4700 units of housing in black neighborhoods, replacing them with 1736 units of public housing (Campbell, 2012).

Public housing was touted as a critical resource but was not one that displaced families readily embraced. The RRHA constructed three additional family developments near Creighton Court in the East End: Whitcomb Court (1958), Fairfield Court (1958), and Mosby Court (1962), concentrating 1848 units of public housing for African American families within an approximately one-mile radius. The Gilpin Court Extension added 338 units in 1957. Displaced black families increasingly sought alternatives to living in public housing, which had quickly become stigmatized. As planning scholar Christopher Silver noted, “Many who chose public housing did so as a last resort .... It was the stigma of life in the ‘court’ that made public housing a poor substitute for the neighborhood environment they had been forced to relinquish” (Silver, 1984, p. 196). The destruction of black neighborhoods

<sup>2</sup> See <http://dsl.richmond.edu/holc/> for an interactive view and analysis of the 1936 Homeowner's Loan Corporation map of Richmond. The persistence of race and class-based segregation has continued. For information on race-based zoning in Richmond and elsewhere see C. Silver (1997).

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