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# Beyond the Last Resort: The Case of Public Housing in Houston

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Driving through Houston for the first time can be an eerie experience; the city appears uninhabited. Air conditioning, an extraordinary dependence on the automobile, and the underground pedestrian tunnel system downtown have swept life off the city's streets. However, there remains one neighborhood, sitting right next to the central business district, that is a vital and visible community. Here there are people on porches, cars driving slowly—their drivers stopping to talk to friends on the street corners—grandparents watching over toddlers, and teenagers hanging out. On Sunday, the singing from one church competes with that from the next, and people pour in from other parts of Houston to “come home” for the day. The setting for this activity is some ninety square blocks of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century shotgun houses, Victorian cottages, and bungalows. Along with small business establishments and twenty churches, these properties comprise an area called Freedman's Town. Recently listed in the National Register of Historic Places, it is the oldest black neighborhood in Houston, and the poorest.

Across an arterial street is the other half of the area known as the Fourth Ward. Long rows of apartments, recalling the work of Frank Lloyd Wright, are laid out along parallel strips of open

space. Here you can find the best basketball game in town, an active soccer contingent, a wild crew of Big Wheel riders, and a large congregation of Indochinese, who hold religious services under the band shell. In the spring and summer, the open greens are ringed by an urban farming system of small vegetable plots and flower gardens. This is Allen Parkway Village, the largest public housing project in Houston, and one of the oldest.

Enter the wrecking ball. This neighborhood will be a victim of urban renewal Texas-style if the City of Houston has its way. Although the Fourth Ward has many positive qualities, it should not be romanticized. The people who live here are almost entirely renters, and very poor ones at that.<sup>1</sup> The area has deteriorated physically, a condition exacerbated by the city's refusal to maintain an adequate level of municipal services. The Housing Authority of the City of Houston (HACH) has boarded up over half the thousand units at Allen Parkway Village, while private landowners are reluctant to invest in maintaining property in Freedman's Town. In an area as poor as this one, feasible strategies for revitalization are difficult to envision.

The city instead has chosen the path of redevelopment, a euphemism for displacement

of residents, demolition of present structures, elimination of the existing patterns of streets and blocks, and construction of high-rise office buildings and upper-middle-income housing. Municipal instigation of redevelopment at this scale is unprecedented in Houston, a city with no zoning, no legacy of public-sector involvement in planning the environment, and with a strong conviction that private interests (not the government) should define the composition of the urban fabric. In the case of the Fourth Ward, the city has changed its mind. The Planning and Development Department of the City of Houston and the local housing authority have orchestrated a coalition of private and public property owners in a concerted effort to sell the 150 acres of land. In addition, the city will offer a prospective single developer new infrastructure improvements (streets, utilities, water and sewage, systems that developers themselves have always had to provide in Houston) if only the developer will buy the 150 acres at the right price and build something more to the city's liking.<sup>2</sup> The 7,000–9,000<sup>3</sup> current residents of Allen Parkway Village and Freedman's Town have had virtually no voice in the process.

For the time being, Houston's extremely soft real estate market has dulled local developers' interest in the

1 **Freedman's Town**, children's parade. Photograph by Phyllis Moore.

2 **Freedman's Town**. Photograph by Phyllis Moore.

3 **Freedman's Town bungalows**. Photograph by Phyllis Moore.

4 **Allen Parkway Village**, long rows to downtown. Photograph by Phyllis Moore.

5 **Allen Parkway Village**, Big Wheel boy. Photograph by Phyllis Moore.

6 **Allen Parkway Village**, Indochinese religious ceremony. Photograph by Phyllis Moore.



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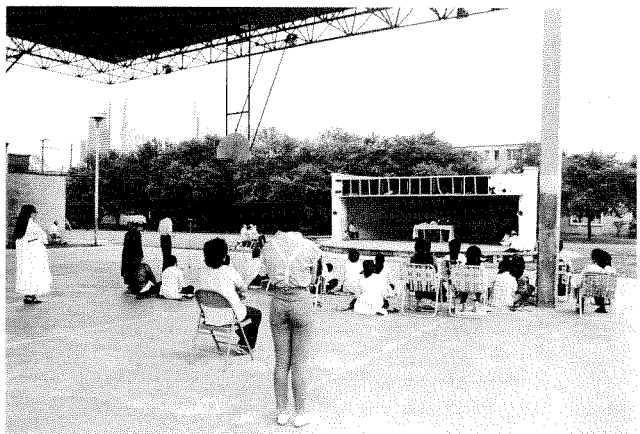
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Fourth Ward. This is the single most significant factor in the community's favor. If alternatives to full redevelopment are to be considered, and if residents are to maintain their essential social and economic networks,<sup>4</sup> a deceleration of this process is necessary. Since no developer has stepped forward, the community and its advocates have an opportunity to voice their opinions about the future of the neighborhood. With enough time, it is hoped that the present inimical differences might mellow enough for reasonable discussion to take place.

Although the plight of Freedman's Town and Allen Parkway Village might at first appear to be a uniquely Texas phenomenon, there are enough warnings to indicate that it is only one example of a fresh wave of urban renewal in the United States. Conceived as the housing of "last resort," public housing across the nation is a new target for redevelopment, particularly the oldest of the existing stock. Of the current 1.3 million units of public housing, about 13 percent is forty years old, and a full 41 percent was built in the 1950s or before. Since virtually no new construction has occurred for over a decade, deterioration of extant public housing is a key issue for all parties. In addition, the 1986 federal budget proposes a dramatic reduction in

funding for public housing modernization (Department of Housing and Urban Development, or HUD, terms for rehabilitation). This new budget is ludicrous in light of already inadequate expenditures for modernization.<sup>5</sup>

In 1983, HUD revealed part of its answer to the problems of public housing: sell or demolish 100,000 units (8 percent of the inventory) within the next five years.<sup>6</sup> Although few developments have actually been demolished thus far, the pronouncement opens doors to an alternative previously considered only when all else had failed. The dynamiting of Pruitt-Igoe is forever etched in the nation's memory largely because it was such a radical step.

Under severe economic pressure, local housing authorities are now looking for ways to cut costs. Some authorities have saved tremendously by establishing more efficient management and maintenance practices.<sup>7</sup> Many authorities, however, are more likely to view demolition and redevelopment as the most expedient means of generating additional revenue.

If demolition is going to become more commonplace, as this analysis suggests, we can also predict the most likely targets. Older public housing developments were usually located in poor neighborhoods as a slum

clearance strategy. These now comprise some of the largest parcels of inner city real estate. A local authority can eliminate a portion of its operating costs by demolishing housing units, and it can add to its funds by selling the land. This is what Houston's housing authority has in mind.

This strategy goes against the fundamental mandate to provide decent housing to the poor and produces a less obvious yet further reaching effect. In big cities, public housing is typically located in poor black neighborhoods.<sup>8</sup> These public housing projects helped to ensure that so-called "highest and best uses" occurred in other parts of town, leaving relatively stable albeit poor communities surrounding public housing. Under such circumstances, demolishing public housing unleashes market demand on poor black neighborhoods. With this comes further displacement and loss of low-cost housing. Housing expert Chester Hartman estimates that 500,000 low-cost units are lost each year from the American building stock, creating higher demand (and monthly rent) for what remains.<sup>9</sup>

In public housing, it appears that ethnic minorities, particularly blacks and Hispanics, will be more likely to be displaced through demolition than their Anglo counterparts. A massive investigation by

Dallas news reporters uncovered discrimination in federally subsidized housing in all forty-seven cities studied. Ethnic minorities are living in far more inferior housing than whites.<sup>10</sup> In terms of public housing, these are the developments most likely to be located in poor neighborhoods and most likely to be selected for demolition. This is triple endemity: first minorities are assigned the worst housing; then insufficient modernization funds hasten deterioration; finally, demolition threatens. The removal of such housing and the redevelopment of adjacent neighborhoods will only amplify the fact that involuntary displacement, in general, is most common for low-income, minority, and female-headed households.<sup>11</sup> It is a terrible irony that the public housing program created to provide for those most in need may be the key to an entrepreneurial revolution: the displacement of poor people both within public housing and in the surrounding neighborhoods to make way for profitable, fashionable, new development. Thus cities may find that the demolition of public housing diffuses the obstinate and perplexing problems of poverty, removing the poor from view. However, losing both public and private low-rent housing can only aggravate those very problems.

The demolition or sale of public housing, regardless of

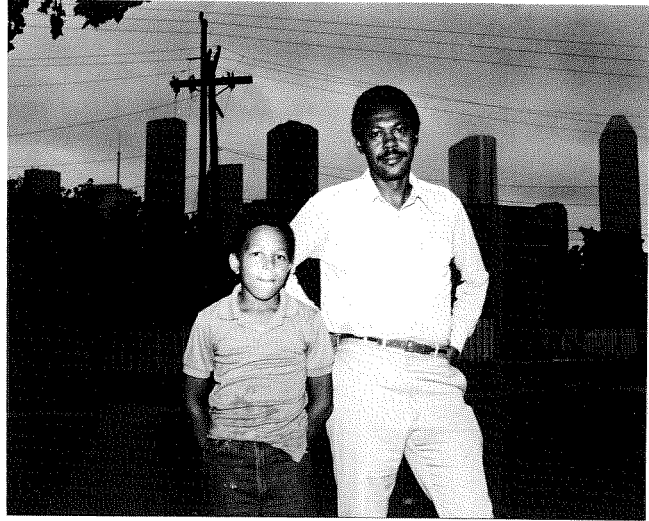
its impact on adjacent neighborhoods, can be debated on its own merits. Since public housing remains in the hands of the public, rather than private interests, it is also a vehicle for civic involvement in broader issues. A federal housing program is subject to national scrutiny and, like historic districts, can become a means for the public to have some voice in determining the character and composition of the urban environment. As such, positions taken on the physical environment have a direct impact on the city's social makeup. It is here that planners, architects, and urban designers can play an important role in neighborhood conservation and revitalization.

This is the understanding we bring to the debate about the future of the Fourth Ward. The story of Allen Parkway Village is recounted here for several purposes. First, it displays a sequence of events that interested citizens in other cities should learn to recognize if they want to have some say in such issues before it is too late (as we have been told may be the case in Houston). Second, it demonstrates that public policy which is superficially acceptable to liberals and conservatives alike can have dramatic regressive consequences for the social and architectural makeup of our cities. Third, it demonstrates how redevelopment proposals

besiege the residents who stand in the way. Their carefully constructed social and economic networks, their attachment over generations to a place, their dignity and basic rights are all ravaged in the process. Finally, it describes the ways in which design professionals can assist the community's activities. The last message is not a new one, but it needs reconsideration in this particular context.

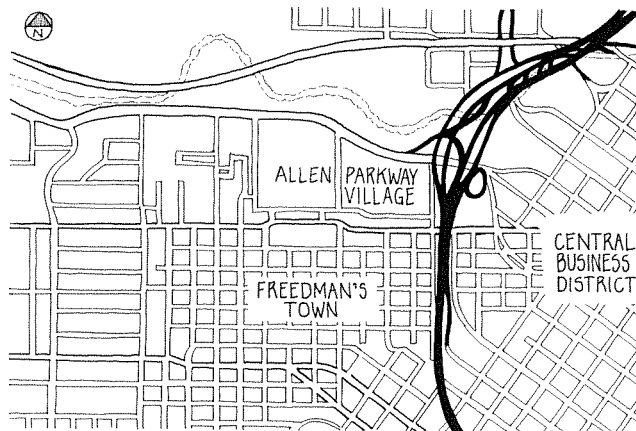
#### The Houston Case

On Friday, April, 6, 1984, some fifty students and ten faculty members from three Texas architecture schools convened at Houston's Allen Parkway Village. At the residents' invitation, they came from Rice, Texas A&M, and the University of Houston to participate in a weekend design competition to explore the possibilities of rehabilitation and to propose alternatives to the housing authority's plan for demolishing Allen Parkway Village. On the site, the students' first impressions of boarded-up apartments were challenged by a convincing demonstration of community life and a sound, if no longer maintained, building stock. With help from faculty members and community advisors, the students spent all day Saturday developing proposals to rehabilitate Allen Parkway Village. That evening, their drawings were displayed at a meeting held in the community center, attended by more than 250



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7 Lenwood Johnson and son,  
Len. Photograph by Paul Hester.



residents and concerned citizens. The event, called the Allen Parkway Village Design Competition, was organized by Lenwood Johnson, president of the Resident Council, and myself.<sup>12</sup>

Lenwood Johnson is the primary individual organizing tenant opposition to demolition. A single parent with a health problem caused by exposure to toxic chemicals in his former workplace, Johnson has led the two-and-a-half year effort to prevent the destruction of Allen Parkway Village. When asked why he is so committed, Johnson states, "This may not look like the best place to live to a lot of people, but it could easily be improved, and it's an extremely important resource. It was here for me when I needed it, and I want to be sure it's still here for others after I'm gone."

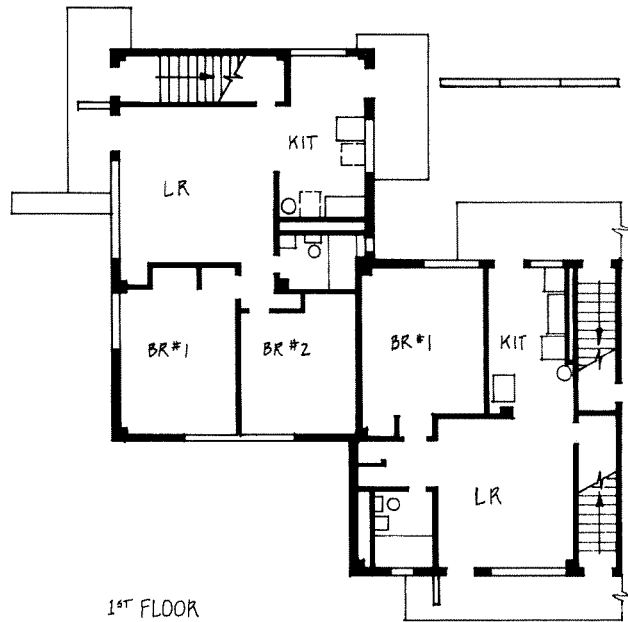


Allen Parkway Village, originally called San Felipe Courts, sits on 37 acres just west of Houston's central business district. At present, it contains one-third of all low-income-family public housing in Houston. Built in 1942 and 1944 as defense housing for white war-industry workers and their families, the 80 buildings contain 1,000 apartments. These two- and three-story structures are organized in long rows along traffic-free green spaces. The design, by a consortium of Houston architects, was published in April 1942 in *Architectural*

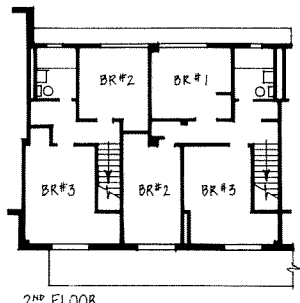
*Record* as model wartime housing.<sup>13</sup>

The buildings are of reinforced concrete frame construction, infilled with hollow tile. Interior walls are faced with plaster and exterior walls with brick and concrete. The apartments are small by current standards, but the building structure is extraordinarily sound, with virtually no signs of age even after forty years of neglect. According to a director of maintenance at the housing authority, the development is so well constructed that it is impossible to conceive of rebuilding to that same quality, regardless of the amount earned from selling the land.<sup>14</sup> Karl Kamrath, one of the original architects, argues that both the construction and the architectural design are exceptional. "The only thing that place needs is to be cleaned up and maintained, but the housing authority has never done that."

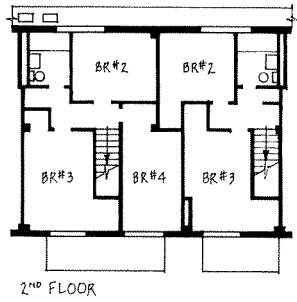
Some 470 apartments are still occupied in Allen Parkway Village, leaving more than 500 units vacant. Over the years, the resident population has changed dramatically, from originally all white occupancy, to primarily black, to a population that is currently 58 percent Indochinese, 33 percent black, and 9 percent white and Hispanic. (An explanation for the current racial makeup and for the vacancies is given later.) About 27 percent of the



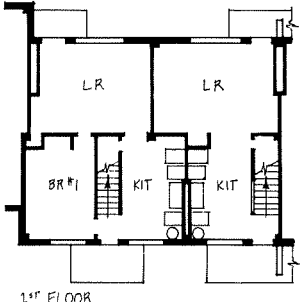
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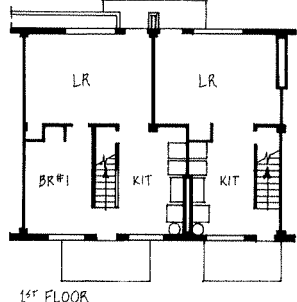
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- 8 Area map.
- 9 Site plan, Allen Parkway Village.
- 10 One-story apartments, one and two bedrooms.
- 11 Two-story apartments, three and four bedrooms.

residents are elderly and live in a specially designated section of the project. The other dominant group is female-headed households, which make up a full 51 percent of the households. Some 21 percent of the residents are reportedly employed, but the actual figure is probably somewhat higher.<sup>15</sup>

Since 1976, at least, the Housing Authority of the City of Houston (HACH) has been deciding what to do with Allen Parkway Village. During the same time, the city government has debated the future of Freedman's Town. Community development and local government funds have been directed away from the Fourth Ward, allowing deterioration to progress at an accelerated rate. Likewise, the uncertain future of the housing project has led HUD to restrict funds for the development's repair and maintenance. In addition, financial mismanagement at HACH caused further reductions in federal funding. In 1982, when Earl Phillips, the present executive director, was brought in to remedy HACH's financial problems, he stated that improving the authority's existing housing stock would be a top priority. HACH's subsequent actions tell a different story.

The cost of rehabilitating Allen Parkway Village has become a numbers game in the argument for demolition.

In 1978, HUD allocated \$10 million to improve conditions at the project of which at least \$7.5 million was never spent.<sup>16</sup> The reason these monies have not been spent is unclear. In any case, the \$10 million in 1978 HUD funds translates to a rehabilitation cost of \$10,000 per unit. In 1982, HACH asked HUD for just \$5,700 per unit to restore safe and sanitary conditions. Only one year later, in 1983, HACH appointed a citizen's committee to study whether Allen Parkway Village should be renovated or razed. They produced the "Technical Report," which recommended demolishing the housing project and redeveloping the adjacent neighborhood, partly on the basis of rehabilitation costs of a whopping \$36,200 per unit.<sup>17</sup> Although the last study is more comprehensive than its predecessors, the figures are suspect in their dramatic inflation of previous estimates as well as estimates for comparable public housing modernization. For example, rehabilitation of similar public housing developments in Texas during the same year (1983) cost \$15,000–18,000 per unit. A specialist in rehabilitating distressed properties has recently completed an independent estimate for Allen Parkway Village's renovation, and, according to his calculations, the HACH figures are vastly inflated, perhaps triple the actual costs. Instead of \$36 million, he estimates

\$12–15 million for full rehabilitation.<sup>18</sup>

Clearly, an agenda has been set for Allen Parkway Village, and this is to profit from the sale of its 37 acres regardless of the cost of rehabilitation. Estimates of probable land costs per square foot have ranged from \$10 to over \$100, but at present these numbers are meaningless. As Tom Forrester Lord, lawyer and expert in low-cost housing and Houston real estate development, states, "In this case, we have a seller but no buyer." The housing authority claims that the money earned from this sale will be used to repair other housing developments in Houston. At the same time, HACH is divesting itself of its most costly development and a third of its inventory of family housing.

In order to dispose of property, the housing authority must relocate all residents who live on the site. This population decreases daily in part because residents seek housing elsewhere but primarily because of the housing authority's use of "constructive eviction," that is, harassment. This is one resident's experience:

First, if your family grows, they won't let you transfer to another apartment. There are five of us in two bedrooms now. Then you get a gas bill for \$91 for one month. That's how much my bill was last

month, and I don't use any gas except maybe hot water and the stove. There's no way I could use more than the allotment we get for free each month. I've got the pilot out on my heater, but I wish they'd just disconnect my gas line. I bet I'd still get a \$91 gas bill. So, if you can't pay the bill, you get an eviction notice. Then you go to court. And then you get kicked out. Yesterday, the manager gave these people next door one hour to be out of their apartment, and an hour later she came back with the police. Now their furniture is all over the sidewalk. One day you have a neighbor, the next day you don't. It's not like people want to move, but if you hold out, when they get through with you, you don't have anything to move with.

The housing authority prohibits moving within the development, so growing families are forced either to move or live in overcrowded conditions. A large number of residents report inexplicable increases in their utility bills. Cars are towed away more often without warning. Another resident says that fines are assessed for previously tolerated practices, such as keeping a pet. In addition to fines, the housing management can then require such residents to pass a housecleaning course.



Then they send you to this housekeeping school they're so proud of. You have to get bus fare, get someone to sit with your kids, take time off if you're working, and take the bus to the school. If you miss maybe 2–3 meetings, you flunk the class. Then they give you an eviction notice.

If residents want to contest any of these practices, they must file a grievance with the housing authority management.

But they told my neighbor she had to have a lawyer to file a grievance, which isn't true. I filed a grievance last month about my utility bill, and I still got an eviction notice. They can't evict me if I've filed a grievance until I've had a hearing. But I got an eviction notice a week ago, and yesterday I got this [Termination of Lease]. And it says I should file a grievance. Now you know, at this hearing, they'll just say they got their records mixed up [and drop eviction proceedings]. I've been through this before.

Effectively, the housing authority saves itself from greater political resistance and from the logistics of relocation when present tenants leave or transfer to another housing project in Houston. HACH then boards up the apartments rather than accept new tenants, yet there are at least

5,000 families on the waiting list for subsidized housing. Some of these people have specifically requested residence at Allen Parkway Village. As Lenwood Johnson says, "The war of attrition is probably HACH's most effective strategy."

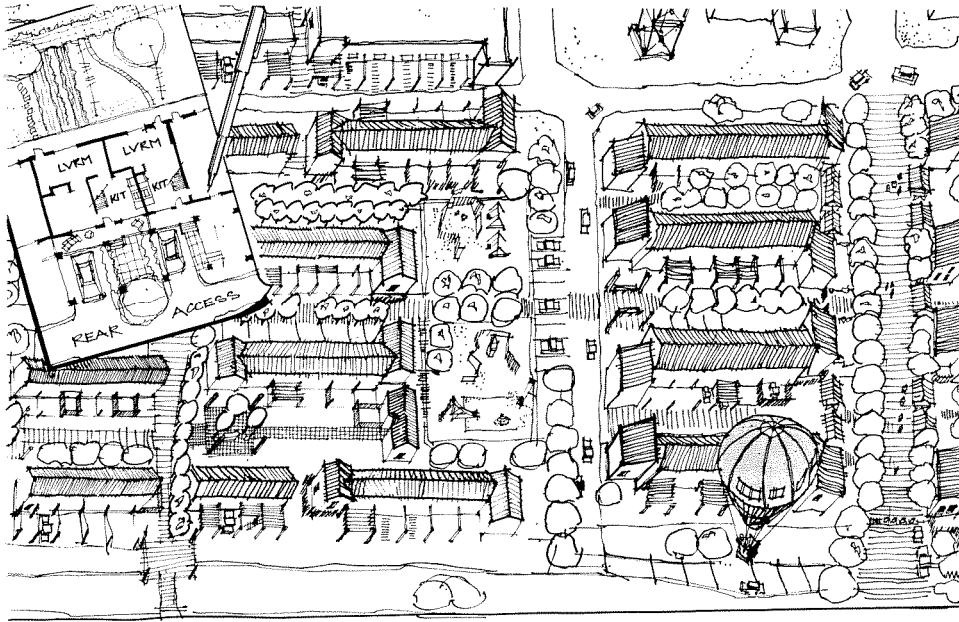
The housing authority has used one additional tactic to prepare the way for demolition. The "Technical Report" came to the embarrassing conclusion that the placement of large numbers of Indochinese in a predominantly black neighborhood was no accident. "It is unlikely that this demographic change in tenant population was due to random assignment from the HACH waiting list; . . . [it] appears to have been an attempt to isolate the [black] community and to defuse the issue [of possible demolition] as a political concern."<sup>19</sup> Most Indochinese residents do not speak English, most cannot vote because they are not yet citizens, and they have little knowledge of their political rights in this country. These Indochinese tenants are unknowing tools of the housing authority's plans. Although residents say that initially there was racial tension between the blacks and Indochinese, this has dissipated as the two groups work together to fight demolition. Over the last two years, the Indochinese have become extremely active in efforts to save Allen Parkway Village.

## The Designers' Contributions

In a situation as complicated as this one, physical design appears to be relatively insignificant. Economic and political conditions seem to have defined both the problems and the solutions under consideration. Nevertheless, the physical condition of both the public housing and the adjacent neighborhood has been a significant issue in the debate. In the "Technical Report," the study team justified razing the buildings partially on the basis of Allen Parkway Village's design. For example, the report states that full rehabilitation "does not resolve basic site design flaws that make livability poor. These include: high densities, security concerns, lack of open space, poor traffic flow, and shortage of parking."<sup>20</sup> These are not, however, immutable obstacles but opinions based on interpretations of present conditions, which have been refuted by a team of architects who visited the site, students' design competition proposals, and rehabilitation projects for similar housing developments. At 27 dwelling units per acre, this is a medium-density, low-rise development. In her extensive study of residential satisfaction in multifamily housing, Clare Cooper states that residential quality can be achieved with high density when other physical conditions are present, such

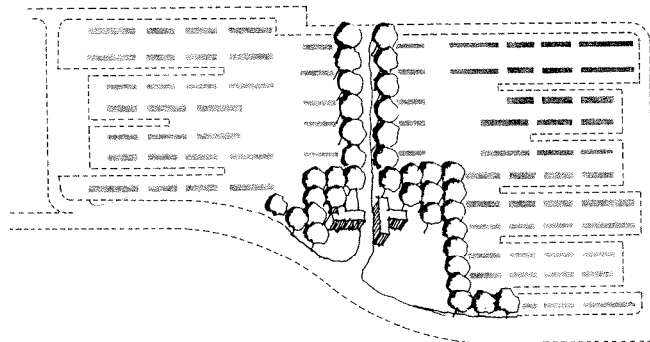
as visual and functional access to open space from the dwelling, protection of privacy, division into small clusters, variety in facade design, and variety in layout.<sup>21</sup> The Allen Parkway Village Design Competition demonstrated that all of these conditions could be achieved with minimal effort. Traffic flow and parking can be improved. There is by no means a lack of open space when only one-fifth of the site is built and the remainder is open. If all the present two- and three-story buildings were spread out as a one-story building (maintaining the current square footage), it would cover less than half of the entire site (floor area ratio of building to site is .45).

A related disadvantage that the committee adduced in its report, that full rehabilitation "requires a large expenditure of funds for little enhancement in livability," is equally questionable. The study team appears to be unaware that the housing project already meets many of the guidelines for family housing established by research on residency patterns and preferences. For example, all ground-floor units have both front and back entries; all units have at least two exposures for light and ventilation; all units are entered at the first- or second-floor level; children's play areas are easily surveyed from the apartments and are safe from auto traffic.



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There is another important way in which the development's physical condition has become a factor in the argument for demolition. Three major thoroughfares leading from Houston's most affluent residential neighborhood into the central business district cut through the Fourth Ward, displaying physical decay and neglect to passersby. One sees the deterioration with no explanation of the causal forces and is tacitly persuaded that the area is beyond improvement. Some tenants have accused the housing authority of capitalizing on this situation by first boarding up apartments along the main street so that the worst of Allen Parkway Village is most visible.



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Finally, it is difficult for most people to *imagine* the kinds of changes that might enhance livability in the housing development. Even housing officials and architects who may have extensive knowledge of low-cost housing feel far more comfortable with new construction than with rehabilitation. Acknowledging this, John Morris Dixon, editor of *Progressive Architecture*, writes, "A relatively new factor in the national housing situation is the need to rehabilitate large numbers of aging public housing units."<sup>22</sup> A set of rehabilitation strategies intended to improve the

**12** Winning scheme of Allen Parkway Village Design Competition by M. Murray, B. Stern, J. Tannehill, and T. Thurston, Rice University.

**13** Charrette solutions recommended creating a "main street" and marking the entry to Allen Parkway Village.

quality of life is only now being developed. At this point, very few individuals can envision the positive transformation of such neighborhoods.

The Allen Parkway Village Design Competition was organized to explore the alternatives for rehabilitation, alternatives more difficult to imagine than razing the place. The twelve modest schemes presented by the student teams stand in stark contrast to the housing authority's vision. All solutions substantially increased on-site parking, and all but one altered the traffic circulation to improve traffic flow. All teams found ways to better integrate the public housing with adjacent Freedman's Town. In addition, clearly marked pedestrian paths through the site created better connections to both the surrounding neighborhood and the parklands to the north. In each solution, the elderly who are currently located in three-story buildings (requiring that some elderly walk up two flights of stairs to their bath and bedrooms) were relocated to other buildings. Since public funds were still available for the construction of elderly housing, several teams proposed new construction of medium-rise elderly units on the site.

Few teams felt that alteration of the existing buildings was necessary beyond the

addition of elements intended to create a less institutional image and to support existing neighboring patterns (for example, hipped roofs, porches, better defined entries, variety in facade treatment). All the proposals emphasized improvements to the open space, adding such garden elements as low walls and landscaping to help define outdoor spaces within the larger community and to give residents a greater sense of proprietorship of the land directly adjacent to their units. Problems considered endemic to the site plan were transformed into positive resources in the design proposals. The probable costs of the student proposals have been calculated and sent to HUD to counter the housing authority's arguments. These estimates indicate that relatively minor expenditures could make tremendous improvements to quality of life at Allen Parkway Village.<sup>23</sup>

In a related effort, over twenty upper-division students and three faculty members at Rice University's School of Architecture participated in a study of Freedman's Town, including the area declared a national historic district.<sup>24</sup> Students conducted extensive interviews with two dozen residents to better understand their attitudes, perceptions, neighboring patterns, and residential histories. The findings

describe a remarkably stable and cohesive community. The residents interviewed have lived in their rented homes for about sixteen years on average, and for thirty-three years in the neighborhood. A majority live in multigenerational households, and over half have relatives living elsewhere in Freedman's Town. All know some of their neighbors; over half say they regularly help care for elderly neighbors or for their neighbors' children. Students also studied and mapped land use, building and block types, physical conditions, and land ownership. With this background, the students developed urban design proposals that reflected the values of residents as well as land prices established by the property owners. The students' work was periodically critiqued by community members. Their concerns about revitalizing the old elementary school, the street of most historical significance, and businesses in the area were incorporated in the urban design schemes.

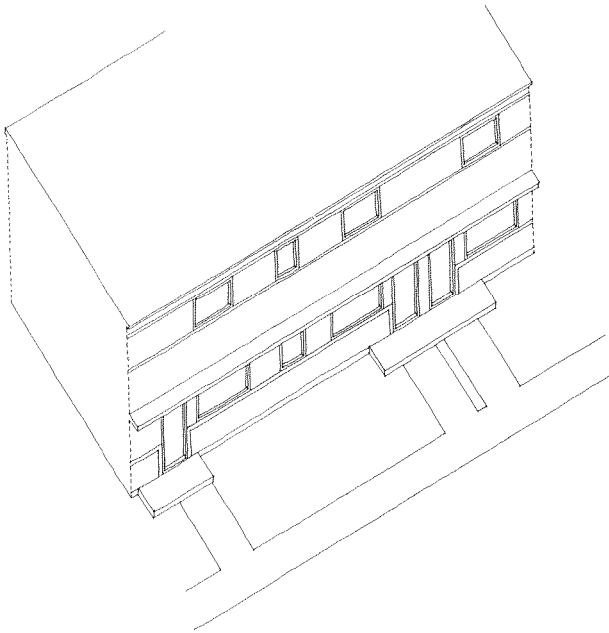
Incremental solutions were proposed, to be implemented in phases by a variety of actors, often including a self-help component. Architectural prototypes were based on existing neighborhood patterns, aimed at tripling the overall population density. The resulting schemes might be called "tethered ideals," since the pragmatics of

available funding, skills, and costs were significant concerns. The study, however, did not delve into these matters in detail, which is the next necessary phase in developing feasible revitalization proposals.

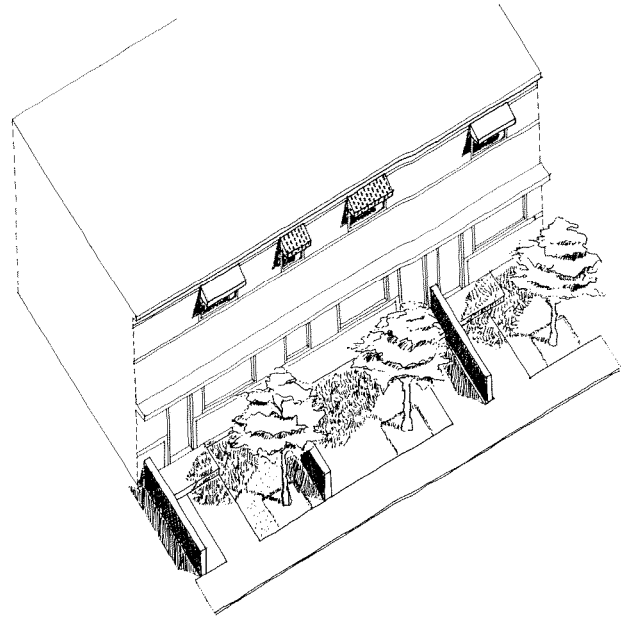
As with proposals for rehabilitating Allen Parkway Village, the urban revitalization schemes for Freedman's Town have provided visions of a previously unimaginable future. The solutions have been presented to an employee of the city planning office and to the Urban Design Committee of the Houston Chapter of the American Institute of Architects, at their request. A downtown gallery, organizing an exhibition on the neighborhood, plans to display the students' work to show possible alternatives to city plans. By no means can design activities alone save this neighborhood, but they can make a substantial contribution to the community's efforts to save itself.

### Alternatives to Demolition

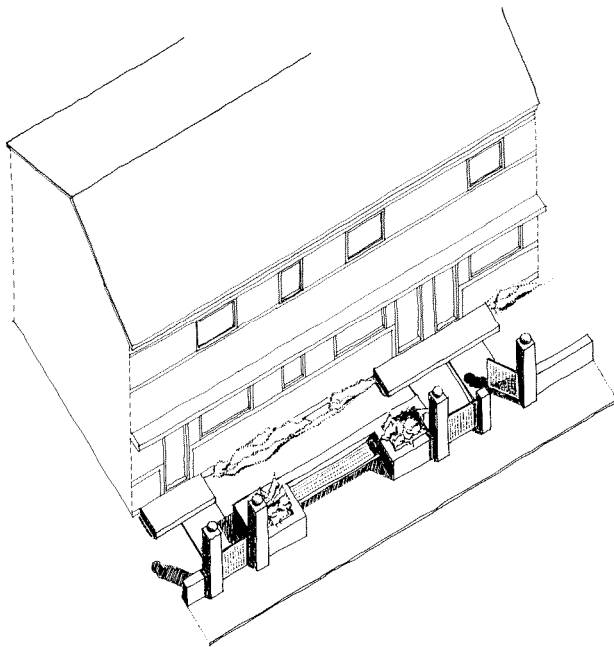
Under the present federal administration, one can easily define public housing as a nonrenewable national resource. The preservation of public housing necessarily entails a rehabilitation strategy. Many local authorities that wanted to preserve public housing struggled to modernize a large part of their housing



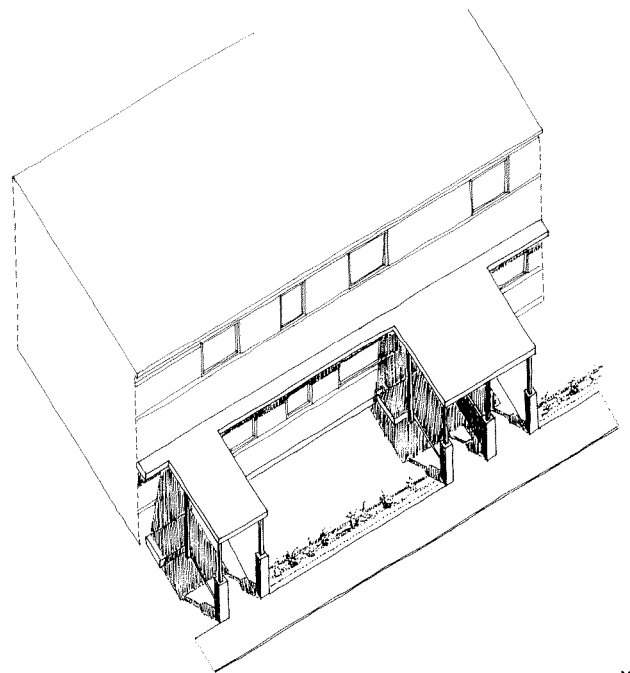
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stock before the predicted budget cuts.<sup>25</sup> There are a few examples of innovative rehabilitation strategies, developed to augment federal programs. In most cases, creative solutions stemmed from tenant disgruntlement that turned into collective action. Rent strikes in St. Louis and Newark public housing, for example, precipitated tenant takeover of management. Under tenant management, maintenance and social service programs were organized as training and employment opportunities for residents.<sup>26</sup> Such programs, and others that involve self-help activities, can improve housing services, slightly reduce costs (or keep them constant), and give tenants a role not only in consumption but production of housing.

Changes in forms of management can be extended to changes in forms of tenure. Public housing can be converted into condominiums, home ownership in fee simple, or cooperative housing. Nearly 3,000 units of public housing have been approved for conversion to some form of home ownership, and about 550 have already been sold to tenants.<sup>27</sup> This solution can solve problems for both housing officials and residents. Recognizing this, HUD is selecting sites for a demonstration project to convert subsidized housing to tenant ownership. There is one significant limitation to a

conversion program: it is only a feasible strategy for residents who have incomes between 50–80 percent of the median income. Therefore, the very poor, including those receiving some kind of welfare, will not be served by this program.

Besides conversions to home ownership, other strategies for public housing combine changes in tenure with alternatives to federal funding, particularly by attracting private monies. Houston is engaged in relatively small-scale efforts to attract private interests to public housing.<sup>28</sup> These efforts are dwarfed by the kind of work the Dallas Housing Authority plans for the 3,500-unit Lake West, the largest low-rise public housing development in the United States. Lake West will surely serve as a test for the employment of creative techniques at a significant qualitative and quantitative scale. With the help of Peterson, Littenberg Architects and other consultants, a complex plan has been proposed.<sup>29</sup> Rather than remove any units from the site, current density will be maintained, and commercial, industrial, and institutional uses will be added to the area. Through numerous meetings with residents and the help of many consultants, a set of mixed strategies will be employed, including all forms of ownership and rental of units. When asked

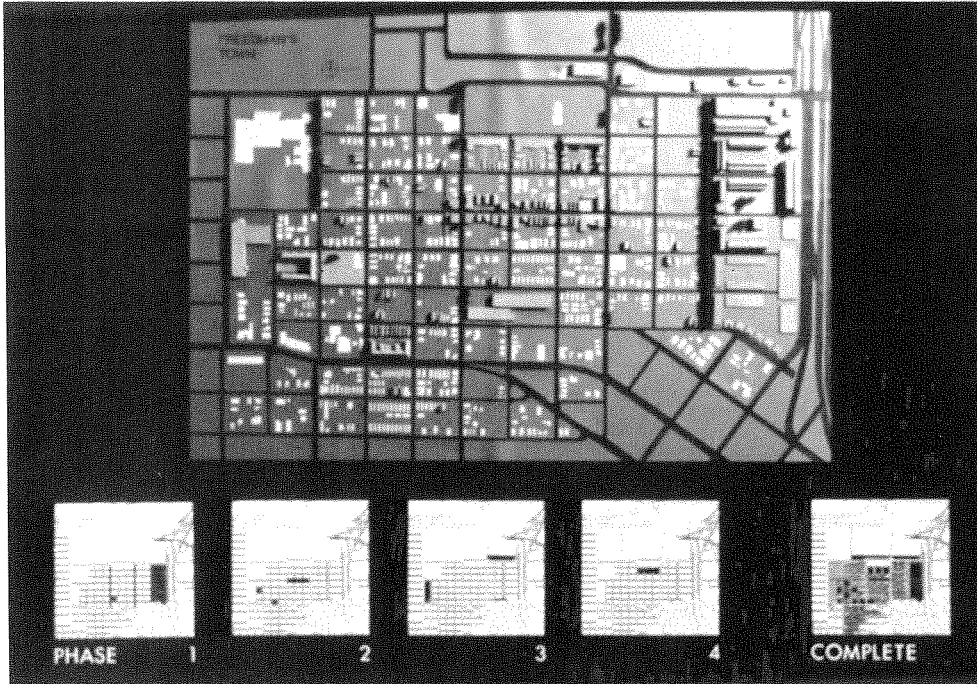
about the cost of the plan, Peterson says,

The housing authority agreed that it would be a big mistake to hinge the proposal on costs. There are many alternatives, including private and commercial sources, that will be aggressively pursued. In the end, the cost to the public will be much less than the total cost to implement the plan.

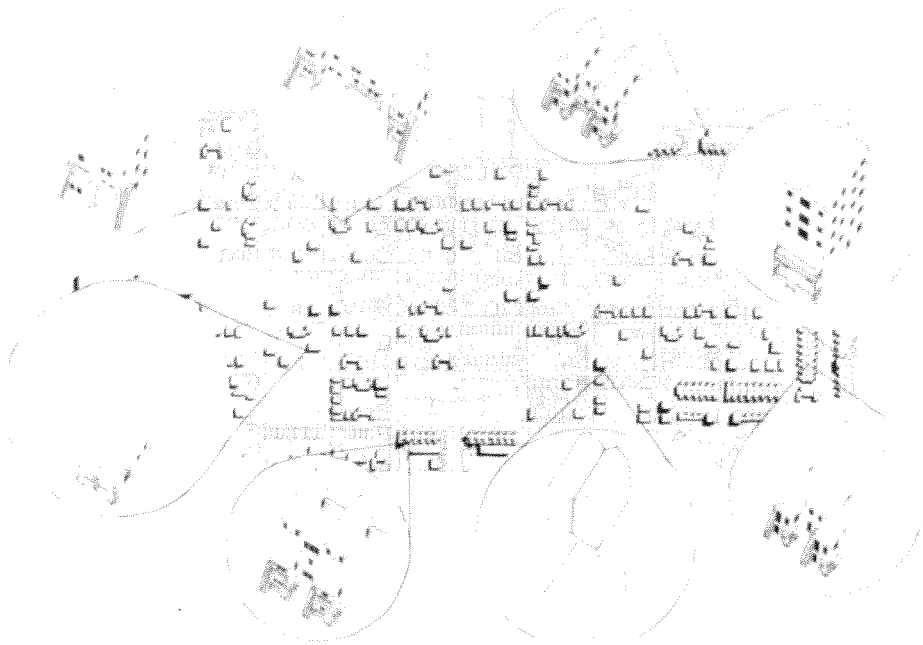
According to the Dallas Housing Authority, total modernization funding requested for the project is \$62 million; they have received \$18 million, and work has begun on the site.

Fundamental to the preservation-demolition issue is the determination of the degree to which public housing has succeeded. The conventional public housing program, although widely criticized, has actually contributed substantially to alleviating housing problems of the poor. In spite of Pruitt-Igoe's powerful image, it was not representative of public housing's evils or the ill effects of public housing design. As analysts have demonstrated, a soft real estate market and racist policy and management practices were more significant than poor design.<sup>30</sup> The problems of high-rise family housing are well documented, but only 10 percent of the public housing in the United States fits this category.<sup>31</sup> In

- 14 Allen Parkway Village.** typical existing facade.
- 15 Free-standing brick wall** to be built by residents creates entries, places to sit, planters.
- 16 Garden walls and landscaping** help define "turf." Colored awnings identify individual apartments.
- 17 Covered paths** define entries and yards.



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addition, the maintenance and operation costs of public housing have always been underfunded by the federal government. The nation commits far more money through tax deductions to home owners than it does to housing lower income people. For example, housing-related tax expenditures (such as home owner deductions) for 1980 alone exceeded *all* expenditures for housing subsidies over the last forty years.<sup>32</sup> Nevertheless, public housing has provided approximately 1.3 million units, sheltering about 4.5 million people. In an unpublished survey conducted in 1979, Joseph Riley of HUD found that about half the residents in public housing had lived there less than five years.<sup>33</sup> Another study found that the turnover rate in 1975 was about 18 percent.<sup>34</sup> Although some of the turnover can be attributed to dissatisfaction with the living environment, it is fair to assume that a proportion of the housing is operating as initially intended, as a stable place from which poor people can improve their economic circumstances. For the large number of vulnerable poor—the elderly, children, and female-headed households—public housing is providing decent housing that they could not otherwise acquire. Among the 29 million people who need low-cost housing, about 4 million are elderly and 11 million are children. For the most part, critics



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**18 Urban design proposal** for Freedman's Town by M. Lee, C. Somers, E. Wastler, and M. Zogran.

**19 Urban design proposal** for Freedman's Town with architectural prototypes highlighted; by E. Landry and M. Transou.

**20 Downtown's shadow over the Fourth Ward.**

Historic Freedman's Town is in the center and Allen Parkway Village at far right.  
Photograph by Paul Hester.

who suggest that public housing is irreparable, or that it does no good, have not looked closely at the statistics. The real failure is that all forms of assistance provide housing for less than one out of four households with incomes below the poverty level.<sup>35</sup>

For some time, the federal administration has been shifting its policy from providing housing to providing income in the form of rent subsidy. Called the voucher or housing allowance system, it requires qualifying individuals to pay 30 percent of their monthly income for rent and provides a subsidy for the rest. Tenants select their own housing, which must meet certain standards in terms of decency and rent. Advocates of the voucher system expound the virtues of freedom to choose one's own housing, the elimination of automatically stigmatized "projects," and the program's cost effectiveness.

After an extensive study of direct rental subsidies, several significant problems with the program were uncovered.<sup>36</sup> For example, the national housing supply does not meet demand in terms of available low-rent units that meet minimum standards. Added to this, the needs of certain groups, such as large families, are especially problematic given the housing presently available. Ethnic minorities still experience

discrimination in housing, so that a smaller portion of qualified housing is actually available to them. Housing allowances are less appropriate for low-income elderly than the provision of specialized housing. And there are what might be called "shadow costs" in private housing: utility and transportation costs and the risk of eviction may be higher. Under ideal circumstances, a direct cash subsidy might be preferable to the provision of housing, but under actual circumstances, the program has serious flaws.

### Conclusion

The Houston example holds a number of troubling implications for public housing in the United States. The most problematic public housing—that is, the oldest, inner city developments—will be targeted for demolition. Razing these developments, given available demographic information, will precipitate the destruction of poor, black neighborhoods as well. Not only will this multiply the amount of involuntary displacement, but a vast number of low-cost rental units will be lost. The further reduction of an already insufficient supply of low-cost housing will proceed hand in hand with increased reliance on housing allowances. Thus, as more people receive rent subsidies, there will be less housing available toward which they

can apply the subsidy. The number of homeless people can only multiply as the "housing of last resort" is eliminated.

Public housing is considered a nonrenewable national resource that must be preserved. To save it will inevitably require greater subsidization from the federal government. This is unlikely to happen in the near future, but in the meantime, municipal housing authorities, design professionals, and concerned citizens can work to delay such irreversible actions as demolition. This "treading water" strategy does not improve the housing situation for the poor, and there are no assurances that future policies will permit a more constructive approach. Biding time, however, does permit the residents in threatened housing to plot out alternatives for their lives. And preserving the public housing and poor neighborhoods leaves open possibilities for revitalization in the future. Under present circumstances, creative examples across the country demonstrate that when all actors are moving in the same direction, public housing can be saved and, moreover, improved.

### NOTES

- 1 Median household income in the Freedman's Town neighborhood for 1979 was \$4,775 (compared to \$18,474 for the City of Houston). Nearly 60 percent of the population lives below the poverty line. U.S. Bureau of Census, Tract 400.26.
- 2 Efraim Garcia, director of planning and development in Houston, organized a majority of private property owners in Freedman's Town to sell land to a single developer. In return for new infrastructure, the developer must include an area of approximately six blocks as an historic district, some elderly housing, and some open space. Garcia's plans are not definite at this point.
- 3 There are approximately 1,000 residents at Allen Parkway Village. The city estimates a population of 6,000 in Freedman's Town, while community groups ascribe a larger area to Freedman's Town and estimate 8,000.
- 4 Carol Stack has written one of the best descriptions of life in a poor black neighborhood, explaining the importance of such networks: *All Our Kin* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974).
- 5 The 1986 federal budget proposal cuts modernization funding to \$175 million from \$1.725 billion in 1985. (Note that the \$1.725 billion is amortized over twenty years to produce approximately \$800 million annually for modernization.) Mary Nenko, National Organization of Housing and Redevelopment Officials, Washington, D.C.
- 6 Chester Hartman, ed., *America's Housing Crisis* (Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1983), p. 2.



- 7 See, for example, "City Reports," *Journal of Housing* (January 1981), pp. 40–41. The article describes the Lorain, Ohio, Metropolitan Housing Authority, which instituted efficient operations, eliminating the need for HUD subsidies.
- 8 Raymond Struyk, *A New System for Public Housing* (Washington, D.C.: The Urban Institute, 1980), pp. 42–43.
- 9 Chester Hartman, D. Keating, R. LeGates, with S. Turner, *Displacement: How to Fight It* (Berkeley, CA: National Housing Law Project, 1982), p. 10.
- 10 Craig Flournoy and G. Rodrigue, "Separate and Unequal: Subsidized Housing in America," *The Dallas Morning News* (February 10, 1985), pp. A1, A24–26. This excellent investigation was reported in daily feature articles during the week of February 10–17, 1985.
- 11 E. P. Achtenberg and P. Marcuse, "Towards the Decommodification of Housing," in Chester Hartman, ed. *America's Housing Crisis* (Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1983), pp. 202–231.
- 12 Diane Ghirardo was actively involved in organizing the charrette, and a majority of Rice architecture faculty assisted students with their schemes. Jurors for the competition were Lenwood Johnson from Allen Parkway Village, O. Jack Mitchell, dean of Rice University School of Architecture, Thomas McKittrick, president of the Texas Society of Architects, and Aldo Rossi, who needs no explanation.
- 13 "War Needs: Housing," *Architectural Record* (April 1942), pp. 47–50. "Project Center Building," *Architectural Record* (May 1942), pp. 52–53.
- 14 This and other information not otherwise footnoted was obtained in a series of interviews with select Houstonians conducted by the author in 1984.
- 15 "Technical Report: Allen Parkway Village/Fourth Ward." Prepared for the HACH, September 1983. 115 pp. See Section V: Demographics.
- 16 *Ibid.*, p. X-5. This report states that HUD will not disburse the funds until the future of Allen Parkway Village is certain; however, this does not explain why the funds were not spent at the time of allocation when presumably HUD would have allowed it. The executive director of HACH reverses that statement, saying HUD will not allow them to spend money on repairs, so that demolition is the only option (*Houston Post*, November 16, 1983). Another explanation is that HUD officials never granted final approval for Allen Parkway Village's rehabilitation because HACH was in a state of financial mismanagement. This kind of bureaucratic Catch-22 creates a smoke screen for city redevelopment plans.
- 17 *Ibid.*, p. X-5.
- 18 Estimates were calculated by James Bridenstine for use in an upcoming hearing with HUD. Bridenstine thinks any large developer could rehabilitate Allen parkway Village for half the housing authority's estimate. If resident labor is included, the cost would be one-third of the HACH estimate.
- 19 "Technical Report," *op. cit.*, p. II-9.
- 20 *Ibid.*, p. XI-3.
- 21 Clare Cooper, *Easter Hill Village* (New York: The Free Press, 1975), pp. 217–218.
- 22 John Morris Dixon, "Subsidized Housing," *Progressive Architecture* (July 1984), p. 65.
- 23 Paul Chapman, project manager at Mayan Construction, Houston, roughly calculated that the costs for either of the two winning schemes would be about \$4–5 million, which does not include subsurface site work or work inside the apartments.
- 24 Instructors for the studio were D. Cuff, P. Rowe, and M. Underhill. The research and design concentrated on the forty blocks declared historic.
- 25 In an unpublished survey (April 1985) of six Texas housing authorities, Paul Crowther found that modernization of eighteen individual housing projects had occurred in the last five years.
- 26 R. Kolodney, "Self-Help Can Be an Effective Tool in Housing the Urban Poor," *Journal of Housing* (March 1981), pp. 135–142.
- 27 Unpublished survey (1984) by Mike Diggs, HUD, Washington, D.C.
- 28 See for example, Earl Phillips, "Opinion and Comment," *Journal of Housing* (May/June 1984), pp. 70–71.
- 29 A brief summary of Lake West proposal is published in *Progressive Architecture* (July 1984), pp. 79–81. A complete description is provided in two reports prepared in March 1984 for the Dallas Housing Authority: "Lake West Master Plan" (110 pp.), and "Lake West Technical Supplement" (23 pp.).
- 30 See Roger Montgomery, "High Density, Low-Rise Housing and Changes in the American Housing Economy," in S. Davis, ed., *The Form of Housing* (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1977). See also Lee Rainwater, *Behind Ghetto Walls* (Chicago: Aldine Publishing Co., 1970).
- 31 Cushing N. Dolbeare, "The Low-Income Housing Crisis," in Chester Hartman, ed., *America's Housing Crisis* (Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1983), pp. 29–75.
- 32 *Ibid.*, pp. 49, 69.
- 33 Joseph Riley, unpublished study, HUD, Washington, D.C., 1979. The sample consisted of 10,000 tenants.
- 34 Struyk, *op. cit.*, p. 17. The sample included eleven public housing authorities in very large cities.
- 35 Dolbeare, *op. cit.*, pp. 36, 37.
- 36 J. Freidman and D. H. Weinberg, eds., *The Great Housing Experiment*, Urban Affairs Annual Reviews, Vol 24 (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications, 1983).