Understanding the Demise and Transformation of Chicago’s High-Rise Social Housing

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Abstract
This paper explains the rise and fall of Chicago’s high-rise public housing projects and explores the Chicago Housing Authority’s ten-year “Plan for Transformation” to tear down those projects. While high-rises were embraced as the urban future in the 1950s, their downward spiral in the 1970s resulted in the near total rejection of the high-rise form for social housing. The source of the downward spiral has not been adequately explained. Extraordinary youth densities created by planning choices were a fundamental – and overlooked – source of social disorder, maintenance difficulties, and project decay.

The Plan for Transformation has replaced high-rises with mixed-income and “New Urbanist” communities, but a handful of renovated high-rises speak to the possibility of such forms for future public housing. The Plan has been contested by advocates for the poor, who challenge the “mix” of incomes in future developments and the loss of affordable housing. Senior buildings, which make up one-third of the publicly-available housing stock, remain viable even though most are high-rise in form – a reflection of the absence of youth. They have been largely saved. The paper concludes that the high-rise approach should not be abandoned for social housing.

Keywords: Chicago Public Housing, Transformation, Youths, Sustaining Mixed-Income Community

Introduction
Chicago’s low-income public housing projects (known in the rest of the world as “social housing developments”) were among the most notorious in the world for their concentrated poverty, bleak designs, and often hellish living conditions. Between 1948 and 1966, the Chicago Housing Authority (CHA), a state-chartered housing agency, built vast numbers of multi-story projects like the Robert Taylor Homes (4,400 flats or “units”), Cabrini-Green (3,600 units), and the Henry Horner Homes (1,800 units). Most buildings ranged from 6 to 22 stories, with taller buildings among the more problematic. To many, these massive complexes were evidence of the flawed nature of social housing provisions in the U.S., one driven by racial considerations and by blind adherence to modernism’s ‘Le Corbusier’ ideas from the 1930s. Like tower blocks in the United Kingdom, these designs – especially when filled with children – proved resistant to social order and difficult to maintain. Once tenants no longer desired high-rise public housing, a predictable spiral of excessive vacancies, revenue shortfall, deferred maintenance and physical decay took hold. In 1991, Wall Street Journal reporter Alex Kotlowitz published There Are No Children Here, a damming expose of the damaged lives of children living in such environments.

Beginning in the mid-1990s, Chicago began tearing down its most troubled projects, and the city is in the midst of a massive “Plan for Transformation,” perhaps the boldest re-thinking and re-invention of social housing in the world. Only a handful of high-rises survive, and in their place Chicago is building vernacular low-rise buildings following the design tenets of the “New Urbanist” school in the U.S. Physical rebuilding has also been accompanied by revised rental and management policies intended to restore the social contract between landlord and renter, though these new restrictions have their critics.

Exactly what went wrong with Chicago’s high-rise public housing has never been fully explicated. Numerous scholars have pointed to racism (Hirsch 1983), poor design (Newman, 1972), bad management (Kotlowitz, 1991), and crime (Popkin et al., 1998), but a systematic explanation of why they were built and what caused them to descend into a unique form of urban hell has not been offered. What happened to Chicago’s high-rise projects? And how has their demise influenced the “Plan for Transformation” as well as the prospects for future social housing, whether high-rise or not? And, most importantly, will the Plan succeed at building sustainable housing?

To the historical question, this paper points away from high-rise design by itself – which is the usual criticism among commentators for social housing failure – and instead points to the age demographics of public
housing as a primary force in its demise. The CHA’s projects failed in large part because they concentrated youth in unprecedented proportions, and the resulting youth-created social disorder overwhelmed the housing stock. This lesson alone is significant for planners of high-rise housing.

To the current debate surrounding the Plan for Transformation, this paper offers a cautionary conclusion, suggesting that the failures of the past have caused an over-reaction against the high-rise form and an embrace of a simplistic “mixed-income” and “New Urbanist” formula for community building.

**The Rise and Fall of High-Rise Social Housing in Chicago**

Planning assumptions, political pressures, and bureaucratic incentives influenced Chicago’s choice to build large-scale, high-rise public housing for families with children between 1948 and 1966. Each context is important for understanding not only the form of projects but also the reasons for their demise.

Advocates for the poor assumed that private housing provision in the U.S. would never adequately serve the “bottom third” of the income scale with decent, safe, and affordable housing. The market failure involved both supply (not enough affordable apartments to rent) and physical condition (too many dilapidated apartments). This logic guided housing policy during America’s ‘New Deal’ policies of President Franklin Roosevelt, resulting in deep subsidies to local housing authorities to build large-scale projects for the poor (Wood, E.E., 1940). The extent of market failure, however, fluctuated with economic conditions, and would decline substantially by the late 1960s due to sustained real economic growth.

A coalition of advocates for the poor and business interests also embraced a second planning assumption. Both agreed that large swaths of the city needed rapid rebuilding in the 1940s. This slum-clearance consensus covered nearly 20% of the city’s housing stock. The Chicago Housing Authority (CHA), the city’s most progressive governmental organization founded in 1937, proposed a plan to first build low-rise housing on the edge of the city for relocation purposes and then redevelop the city wholesale – including nearly every neighborhood housing African Americans – with high-density, high-rise social housing. The CHA “conservatively” estimated in 1949 that 105,000 publicly-owned units would be needed to replace slums and address market failure (Meyerson and Banfield, 1955). In the end, only 20,000 post-war units were built.

Political pressures focused on race also influenced the shape of public housing in Chicago, though this influence has received so much attention that it has crowded out other explanations for failure. During the 1940s and 1950s, a massive migration of African Americans to Chicago strained race relations and resulted in entrenched housing segregation. The increase from 278,000 African Americans in 1940 to 813,000 in 1960 put enormous pressure on the city’s housing markets, and rapid transition of neighborhoods from white to black occurred steadily in this period. In this atmosphere, politicians in white areas of the city sought to prevent the CHA from building vacant land relocation projects in white neighborhoods, especially after 1946 when the CHA signaled its intention to racially integrate them. Meanwhile most African American politicians embraced redevelopment of black neighborhoods as social improvement. The combination of white resistance to public housing plus the widespread acceptance of the slum clearance consensus resulted in most projects being developed in older black neighborhoods (Hirsch, 1983; Hunt, 2005).

Bureaucratic incentives also served as an important historical context influencing Chicago’s post-war projects. Under the 1937 Housing Act, ninety percent of construction costs – including site clearance, design, and all structures – were paid for by the U.S. federal government, while cities could meet their ten-percent contribution through tax exemption (Fisher, 1959). This formula essentially offered free money to cities, and Chicago eagerly sought maximum allotments from Washington, D.C. Chicago’s Mayor Richard J. Daley (1955-1976) embraced public housing construction (though not in white neighborhoods), in part because of his interest in rebuilding the city and in part because of the federal dollars it brought to the city’s builders and unions (Biles, 1995).

The choice to embrace high-rise designs also had historical and bureaucratic underpinnings. In 1945, the CHA consciously began to imitate New York City (which was then remaking its Lower East Side) and also adopted Le Corbusier ideas in planning the rebuilding of Chicago. The high-rise form offered an obvious solution to building at higher densities while still including green space for children’s play. But the high-rise decision represented a distinct choice, and low-rises were considered but rejected. CHA Director Wood defended the first use of elevator buildings at Dearborn Homes in 1945, explaining, “The determination to construct six-story elevators instead of three-story walk-ups that the same density will permit was made on the same basis as our desire to achieve a more attractive pattern for the use of the land. The use of these elevator structures gives us wide-open spaces, larger playgrounds, and a general effect of a park that will not be possible if the land were developed as three-story walk-ups” (Wood, E., 1945). By 1952, the CHA began planning buildings reaching 22 stories, as at Cabrini Extension Homes, completed in 1958 [Figure 1].
The CHA’s early post-war projects employed prominent Chicago modernist architects, including Harry Weese and Skidmore, Owings, and Merrill, in an effort to “experiment” with the high-rise form. Wood encouraged efforts to “humanize” high-rise buildings by using open-air galleries as entryways to apartments. The gallery innovation is most clearly seen in Loomis Courts, a project singled out for praise by a federal architectural advisory board. At the time one architectural critic applauded the innovation as “sidewalks in the air” [Figure 2], but these galleries would later be condemned as an unfortunate design decision due to their energy inefficiency when compared to central-corridor buildings (Whittlesley, 1951).

At the same time, however, Washington issued cost regulations that required 50 units per acre for public housing projects built on high-cost slum land, all but forcing the use of high-rises. Cost concerns were behind the regulations, as more units per acre would dilute fixed land costs to keep per-unit total costs within politically acceptable bounds. Officials in the administration of President Harry Truman (1945-1953) had experienced ongoing fights with Congress over the legitimacy of social housing, and they feared a public relations disaster if costs in social housing began exceeding the purchase price of private housing in suburban areas (Hunt, 2005).

In Chicago, Elizabeth Wood had also turned against high-rises by 1952. In an Architectural Forum issue devoted to the question of high-rise housing, Wood made “The Case for the Low Apartment.” Taking a child-centered perspective, she argued: “The row-house solution is simple and natural. The indoor-outdoor activity takes place close to where the mother is at work. The child can keep in touch with her. … But in an apartment house [high-rise] project, where playgrounds are carefully arranged at some distance, vertical as well as horizontal, from the family supper table, there will be much less parent-child play….” (Wood, E., 1952). Washington, however, refused to back down on regulations forcing high-rises on high-cost slum land.

Wood’s comments were based on experience that went beyond child-rearing. CHA project managers encountered serious problems in managing its early high-rises. Elevator systems broke down frequently, involving considerable expense; children’s games of “elevator tag” were often blamed. Small-scale vandalism in large developments with multiple entryways created large problems. By 1958, the CHA reported replacing 18,000 broken light bulbs per month (Hunt, 2005).

The CHA appealed to Washington in 1955 to revise plans for future projects and build only low-rise designs.
After much delay, Washington replied that the plans were too expensive, as each apartment would cost over $20,000 to build at a time when a new house in the suburbs could be purchased for around $15,000. For four years, the CHA pleaded with federal officials for approval of low-rise, walk-up design, with both sides arguing over costs. Mayor Richard J. Daley traveled to Washington twice to lobby on behalf of low-rises, but to no avail. In 1959, Washington forced the CHA to build tower blocks for its most notorious projects, including Robert Taylor, Cabrini-Green, and Henry Horner (Hunt, 2005).

Chicago’s Unprecedented Youth Densities

Not discussed in these negotiations between Chicago and Washington was a crucial planning choice that ultimately made the CHA’s high-rise buildings unsustainable social environments. The CHA’s waiting lists were clogged with working-class families with five or more children who faced the greatest hardships due to lack of inventory and landlord discrimination. The CHA, in an effort to accommodate such families, programmed 79% of units in its 1959 developments with three or more bedrooms. This crucial decision was made with little discussion or analysis (Hunt, 2005).

But building high-rise buildings with large apartments and then filling them with large families created a social disaster of enormous proportions. The central problem, then, with the CHA’s high-rise developments was not their height or their modernist design, but the unprecedented and overwhelming numbers of youth in the buildings. Public housing was literally overrun by children, creating social chaos in high-rises that quickly sent them spiraling downward. The decline was compounded by the lack of government intervention to support the social programs and additional maintenance so desperately needed in a child-centered environment.

The staggering age demographics in CHA housing can be seen in Figure 3.

A typical established Chicago community contains multiple family types, including single people, the elderly, and families with children. In 1960 the average Chicago neighborhood had two adults for every minor, and no neighborhood had more youths than adults – except public housing complexes, which inverted this ratio (Hunt, 2005).

The CHA’s high-rises housed at least twice as many minors as adults. The Robert Taylor Homes opened in 1963 as a predominantly working-class project with mostly two-parent families with employment income. But there were 21,000 youths, and 7,000 adults. This never-before-seen demographic imbalance made it difficult for the relatively small number of adults – let alone project managers – to maintain social control.

Managers’ reports readily describe the effects of such concentrations of children as well as the lack of planning for their presence. In 1964, less than a year after the Robert Taylor Homes opened, the CHA asked Washington for more playgrounds, reporting that “2,000 children may be cramped into one or two relatively small play areas.” Children also overwhelmed branch libraries, parks, schools, and other social institutions. Planning had not prepared for the onslaught of children into the newly created environments (Hunt, 2005).

As a result, youths directed their frustrations and destructive impulses on their buildings with little resistance, repeatedly damaging elevators, trash chutes, lighting, and plumbing. As the major artery of high-rise buildings, elevator failure proved the most devastating [Figure 4]. Only two elevators served buildings with 150 units, and when both were out of service, as they often were, tenants were forced to walk up.

Figure 3: Chart showing proportion of youths in Chicago and CHA housing. Source: U.S. Census data and CHA.

Figure 4: Mothers at Henry Horner Homes patrolling elevators in effort to restore social order, 1967 (CHA)
This is not to blame families with many children or even the children themselves or their parents for these destructive impulses – that would be blaming the victim. Instead, the planning choice to concentrate large numbers of youth and relatively few adults, proved to be a crucial mistake in public housing history, especially in Chicago.

Social disorder and vandalism helped drive the working-class out of public housing, eventually creating the concentrated poverty that became its defining characteristic. With rents set as a function of tenant income, poorer tenants created revenue shortfalls and maintenance neglect, leading eventually to high vacancy rates. Working-class African Americans living in social housing were also pulled from public housing by a strong job market and an increasingly affordable housing market by the late 1960s (Berry, 1976). As a result, the working-class fled. In 1964, 65% of families had a full-time wage earner, but ten years later, only 15% did (CHA, 1975).

The loss of the working class, and the loss of their rent-paying ability, sent the CHA’s finances into a tailspin in the 1970s at precisely the time when it needed more resources to manage its distressed buildings. Washington stepped in with additional subsidies, but funding formulas favored well-managed housing authorities. The CHA was highly inefficient in its maintenance operation, even compared to other municipal housing authorities, in large part because of union control over hiring and work rules (Newman, 1982).

Without social order, without resources, and without an efficient maintenance operation, the downward spiral was rapid and irreversible. The CHA lost its management capacity by the early 1980s as inefficiency, cronyism, and poor management discipline increasingly pervaded the cash-starved organization. Meanwhile, the drug epidemic of the 1980s ravaged CHA projects, many of which were controlled by gangs connected to the drug trade (Popkin, 1995). By 1989, the U.S. Census Bureau reported that 18 of the 100 poorest census tracts in the nation were located in Chicago, each a public housing development (U.S. Census, 1989). Horrific conditions, financial insolvency, and managerial disarray led to “de-facto” demolition, as the CHA abandoned apartments that it could no longer repair [Figure 5]

Not until 1995 would Washington or Chicago confront failure and demand major reform. That year, the federal government took over the Chicago Housing Authority due to its demonstrated managerial incompetence, and began the long process of reinventing social housing in the city.

Figure 5: De-facto demolition of open gallery corridor 911 N. Sedgwick at Cabrini Extension, 2007 (Robert Lau).

The Plan for Transformation

After a three-year receivership in which Washington restored managerial discipline, the City of Chicago regained control over the CHA in 1998 and promptly announced a bold “Plan for Transformation” that promised to remake social housing in the city.

Washington’s Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) promised US$1.5 billion over ten-years to tear down high-rise buildings deemed unsalvageable and replace them with “mixed-income” communities of low-rise housing built in the vernacular “New Urbanist” style supported by many architects and planners. To receive this funding, the CHA was required to maintain fiscal discipline and provide benchmarks of performance on a range of measures, including social outcomes among its tenants. The ultimate goal, now slightly behind schedule, is to produce 25,000 units of new social housing for low-income families (CHA, 2007).

Because of the complexity of the public housing issue in Chicago, this paper will concentrate on the choice to tear down high-rises and the financial aspects of rebuilding. However, some social, urban planning, and legal components of the plans must be mentioned because of their importance to the entire transformation.

The first step, actually accomplished in 1996, involved determining the viability of the inventory of public housing to reveal conditions and possible renovation status. The survey included not only housing for families with children, but high-rise structures designated for the elderly as well as a smaller proportion of low-rise developments. While the elderly projects fared well (in part because they had no youths), over 19,000 units (out of 30,000) for families with children scored poorly. They could not pass a “viability” test that compared the cost of renovation versus the issuance of a housing voucher for 15 years that families could apply to
housing in the private market (this voucher is known as the “Section 8” or “Housing Choice Voucher” program in U.S. housing policy jargon). The 19,000 units – a figure that included nearly all of the CHA’s high-rise units for families with children - were scheduled for destruction. Under current plans, only six high-rise buildings for families with children have not been torn down and instead have been renovated.

The 1996 “viability” study may have provided a rationale for tearing down Chicago’s high-rises, but on a practical level, few had faith that the neglected and now infamous buildings could be saved. For two decades, projects like Cabrini-Green and the Robert Taylor Homes had been symbols of social housing policy failure. Most Chicagoans carry with them a mental picture of broken elevators, boarded up windows, and gang-infested buildings dominated by a drug and welfare culture that sapped human life. Whether fair or not — and some developments defied this stereotype — the CHA could never have won city-wide support for saving its high-rise buildings of the past. Some residents and activists pleaded for rehabilitation, arguing they had created a “community” against great odds (Venkatesh, 2000). But most politicians and planners recognized that no amount of renovation could make them fiscally or socially successful by working-class standards.

The Mixed-Income Agenda

In 1998 and 1999, the CHA formulated its “Plan for Transformation” around HUD guidelines and a reformed mission. Instead of merely being the developer of low-income housing, the CHA broadened its mandate to include:

- Providing quality-housing opportunities to low-income households in mixed-income settings.
- Contributing to the improvement of the communities where public housing is located.
- Providing greater housing choices.
- Encouraging business development opportunities for the public housing residents within their communities.

The mixed-income concept is central to the Plan for Transformation, and it originates from belief among most planners that the concentration of poverty was the single most important influence in public housing’s demise. Unexplored in this formulation is the role of youth density, though economic integration has the unintended consequence of reducing youth-adult ratios.

Mixed-income policies were also an outgrowth of an important legal case in Chicago. In 1966, a handful of public housing residents led by Ms. Dorothy Gautreaux filed suit charging the CHA had violated the civil rights of African Americans through its site selection and tenant selection practices. After ten years of litigation, the courts ruled in favor of Gautreaux, and the CHA’s development policies have been under the supervision of federal court ever since. The Gautreaux plaintiffs demanded the special de-concentration and racial integration of social housing developments, which were to be built on small “scattered-sites” of not more than six units. Later, the plaintiffs demanded economic integration as well, with the goal of producing “mixed-income communities.” The theory is that working-class and middle-class residents will provide social networks and political power to previously isolated low-income residents (Polikoff, 2006).

The “mix” of incomes in the Plan for Transformation is a constant source of contention among housing advocates, planners, and the CHA. The CHA argues the appropriate mix is one-third low-income poor (known as “public housing eligible”), one-third “affordable” (defined as between 80% and 120% of median area income), and one-third “market rate.” Little research has backed this segmentation of the market. Advocates for the poor would like a greater proportion of the low-income poor and dismiss “market-rate” as an opening to gentrification. Each redevelopment has been handled differently, with court settlements on behalf of former public housing tenants and arbitrary decision-making often guiding policy (Wilens, 2006).

To design the new communities, planners flocked to the “New Urbanist” model – itself born as the antithesis to both large-scale modernism in the 1950s and suburban excesses in the 1980s. New Urbanism seeks to revive 19th century urban models and to integrate housing design into the existing neighborhood fabric by using vernacular architectural forms. The careful delineation of public and private space in New Urbanist guidelines is intended to encourage communal interactions among neighbors. Similarly, “mixed-use” combining residential and commercial space hopes to reinvent the walking city of the past (Duany et al., 1993).

From the CHA’s perspective, however, New Urbanism offers a way for public housing to become “invisible” in the landscape. More than anything else, the CHA’s high-rises stood out as separate spaces reserved for the poor, and residents felt, stigmatized them in the eyes of other city residents [Figure 6].

As a result, the CHA is keen on ensuring that the Plan for Transformation produces social housing that looks like, and functions like, any other private neighborhood in the city. This change had both a physical aspect – “blending in” visually – and a psychological aspect for low-income tenants. No longer will public housing tenants be wards of the state, the CHA says, isolated as second-class citizens in tower block reservations. Instead, it hopes they will interact with members of the larger community as equal citizens and hopefully benefit from the contact.
Sustaining Mixed-Income Community

A mixed-income community that has sustained itself for many years is a complex organism that has evolved over time. Residents have a loyalty or a desire to remain rooted in these neighborhoods because several elements are present, including:

- A stable housing stock
- Civility on public streets and sidewalks
- Established retail, restaurant, and entertainment enterprises
- Employment opportunities
- Convenient public transportation
- Functioning neighborhood organizations, including religious institutions,
- Respected schools
- Reasonable parks and green spaces

Chicago has many established neighborhoods that provide the named elements above, but they have evolved over generations. The Plan for Transformation hopes to build such neighborhoods from scratch, attracting a mix of incomes, businesses, and institutions almost overnight.

For some former public housing sites, re-attaching new construction to the existing urban fabric will not be difficult. At Cabrini-Green, for example, gentrification had reached the edge of the project before its demolition, making it relatively easy to attract retail and a mix of incomes to the New Urbanist community that replaced it. The concern at the former Cabrini site is how to ensure that the CHA will keep its commitment to “mixed-income” and not let gentrification push out the former residents of Cabrini who have settled into the “mix.”

But at other, less well-located developments, the challenge is to create a mixed-income community from the ground up. These sites lack nearby retail and employment opportunities. While many have social services, religious institutions, and public transportation (legacies of the old projects), they also remain surrounded by low-income neighborhoods. The CHA has delayed the redevelopment of these less-attractive sites, hoping in part that gentrification can revive prospects for market-rate housing (CHA, 2007).

Most of the “transformations” of high-rise projects have been devised through a complex planning process that involves a partnership between the CHA and private developers, with input from former residents. Developers competed for the right to rebuild former public housing sites, presenting proposals that complied with a host of CHA and HUD guidelines, including extensive community input. Rather than build and manage housing as a state-run enterprise as it had in the past, the CHA has become an intermediary between developers and residents for facilitating new construction on its old sites. [Figure 7] Still, the contentious nature of the process has often led to litigation, with planning choices mediated by local courts (Wilin, 2006).

Senior High-Rise Buildings Saved

In stark contrast to the CHA’s family projects and their dense concentrations of youth, the 9,480 units dedicated as “Senior housing” have fared far better. No Senior building failed the 1996 “viability” test, even though most units are in high-rise buildings of 12-28 stories and many are located adjacent to problematic CHA family projects. While some have vacancy problems, developers have deemed them readily amendable to renovation and upgrades (CHA, 2007).

The Senior units are studio and one bedroom, typically 40 to 60 square meters in size. Seniors have shown a preference for the high-rises, and waiting lists for such developments have always been long. Most
Senior buildings offer accessibility (one of the CHA benchmarks) and community rooms for public activities. Seniors also want good public transit links, access to health care resources and religious and social institutions. Most high-rises are located in areas with reasonable connections to these services. Senior housing also differs from family housing in another important respect: most seniors have steady if small incomes from stable public pensions, and can therefore pay at least some rent. In 2004, the average income for senior residents of the CHA was $10,099, a low figure for the area but still twice that of the former family projects, where tenants were largely dependent upon public welfare (CHA, 2007).

Some High-Rises for Families Saved as Well

Despite the condemnation of the high-rise form by critics, the CHA has saved six buildings. Two were rehabilitated in the early 1990s, before the Plan for Transformation, and have a “mix” that excludes market-rate renters. The Lake Park Crescent development, located near Chicago’s lakefront, is an updated version of a 1950s, center corridor building, with additional security, delineation of public space, and private management. The two bedroom units include families without children to keep a far lower youth density (Rosenbaum, et. al, 1998). Two eight-story Skidmore, Owings, and Merrill buildings, formerly known as Ogden Courts, have also been renovated with an innovative glass curtain wall to enclose the formerly open galleries. This project has remained low-income. The CHA has also preserved were two 22-story tower designed by Bertrand Goldberg, though re-occupancy is still recent at the time of this writing.

The high-rise Lake Park Crescent property in the Oakland neighborhood, developed and managed by a private developer, appears to be successful (Pattillo, 2007). The units are over half occupied, with an average household income of over $21,000. The mix is half ‘market rate’, one quarter ‘affordable’, and one quarter ‘public housing’. This mix seems to provide a sustainable community, but more time is required to determine if it is successful. The amenity for Lake Park Crescent is the lake views, which most CHA high-rises lack. Even though other established lakefront neighborhoods can provide the resources the CHA is looking for for its families, the existing communities may resist their entry. [Figure 8]

While rhetoric has condemned high-rises, these examples suggest that the problem of high-rise housing is not their form, but the density of youth, their large-scale agglomeration, and their management.

Progress and Criticism

By 2007 the CHA had renovated or redeveloped 15,000 of the expected 25,000 housing units in the plan, and it announced that final completion will take longer than the expected ten years. While some critics see this as slow progress, especially since many of the completed units are in renovated Senior buildings, others see these figures as encouraging given the previous incompetence of the CHA (Sanchez, 2006). Benchmarks and guidelines had to be achieved and followed over the years. Many problems of a system-wide bureaucracy, the massiveness of the scale, and the complexity of the plan had to be overcome.

Several controversial aspects of the plan remain thorns in the side of the CHA, however. The first centers on the relocation of residents to different neighborhoods during renovations or rebuilding. These relocations often caused disruption, with tenants shuffled between buildings or given a voucher to find housing in the private market. Many ended up in segregated, high-poverty neighborhoods, and others lost the sense of community – however tenuous – that existed in their social housing development (Rogal and Turner, 2004). Critics charged, with much merit, that the CHA could have built replacement units first and then relocated residents directly from old buildings to new ones (Wilens, 2006). Similarly, the CHA missed an opportunity to help those given vouchers relocate to non-poverty neighborhoods, as an experimental program had done in the 1990s (Rubinowitz and Rosenberg, 2000).

Second, when the Plan is completed, the number of publicly-subsidized housing units for very low-income families will drop by roughly half from its peak in the 1970s. For instance, the Robert Taylor Homes once held 4,400 units, but after redevelopment, it will contain 2,550 units, only 851 of which will be available to very low-income families. Tenant advocates see this as a blow to the already difficult affordable housing market in Chicago. The CHA argues that most units have been “lost” for over a decade due to “de-facto demolition” and without “transformation,” the situation would be worse.
Third, former CHA residents returning to the new “mixed-income” communities must now adhere to a new set of rules that many see as demeaning and unfair. Very low-income families, for example, are required to pass a drug test to remain while their market-rate neighbors do not. Rules ranging from occupancy to noise are intended to impose middle-class norms on former CHA residents, an effort many see as class discrimination.

Finally, the Plan for Transformation includes social service provisions that are deemed inadequate for the needs of former residents (Sanchez, 2006). To its credit, the CHA has tackled the problems of residents in a holistic fashion, but its resources are thin, and delivering on promises of job training and financial counseling, for example, are difficult (CHA, 2007)

Conclusion
The Plan for Transformation, with its mixed-income and New Urbanist solutions, offers a perceived antidote to the failure of social housing in Chicago, but no “autopsy” on the original program has ever been conducted. Failure was not merely the result of high-rise design, but instead had complex roots in the planning choices to build vast projects filled with extraordinary densities of youth.

The Plan is a massive, complex plan to completely reshape 25,000 units of Chicago’s public housing. While few of the family high-rises had enough value to survive, none of the senior high-rise units were demolished and all have been renovated and are currently privately managed. This alone suggests the importance of youth in shaping the destiny of public housing in Chicago.

The mixed income communities that the CHA has created, in partnership with private developers, are intended to become “invisible” and look like any other Chicago neighborhood, with the exception of the city’s high-rise housing for the wealthy along its lakefront, which has long been successful due to its financial resources and the paucity of children.

Is it possible to create a mixed income, sustainable community of families in high-rise buildings? The CHA has saved a handful of buildings that might prove the viability of such an option. The key will be management and maintenance. High rises, by their nature, require more and well-qualified management and maintenance. High rises, by their nature, require than low-rise structures do. The shift to private management will help, but resources in the form of an adequate subsidy stream are essential.

Is it possible plan an entire community of numerous mixed income high-rises? Can it be sustained in terms of a healthy mix of racial, income, educational, and age levels? Can it be integrated with seniors, young singles, couples, and families with children? The CHA has abandoned this possibility, fearful of its past failures. If it can make the Plan for Transformation succeed, perhaps it can find a way to take these lessons and apply them to higher-density urban living in a high-rise environment.

References
WOOD, E. (1945). Letter from CHA Executive Secretary Elizabeth Wood to Alderman George D. Kells, September 21, 1945, in the files of the Chicago Housing Authority.