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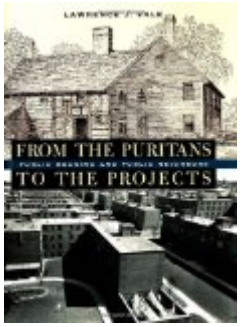
Lawrence J. Vale. *From the Puritans to the Projects: Public Housing and Public Neighbors.* Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2000. Vii + 392 $45.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-674-00286-9.



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Housing the Poor and the Shirking of Public Responsibility

On any given day, hundreds of visitors arrive at the President John F. Kennedy Library in Boston, Massachusetts. For the newcomer, the notable landmarks on the journey to the Kennedy Library are likely the campuses of the University of Massachusetts at Boston and the Massachusetts State Archives. But for many Boston area residents, the waterfront residential community of Harbor Point is central to their way-finding process. Built in 1954 adjacent to a waste incinerator and a sewage pumping station, Harbor Point was once Columbia Point, New England's largest and "most notorious" (p. 253) federally subsidized, low-income public housing development.

The story of how the Boston Housing Authority (BHA) reinvented Columbia Point as Harbor Point is one of many subplots examined by Lawrence Vale in *From the Puritans to the Projects*. A member of the faculty of MIT's Department of Urban Studies and Planning, Professor Vale addressed questions regarding the relationship between public housing and public poverty policy, themes of interest to scholars and students of housing and urban planning, race, urban economics, and federal-municipal political relations. How have Americans viewed their collective responsibility to provide shelter for "public neighbors" (p. 8), indigent people who were unable or unwilling to provide for themselves? How have attitudes towards public provision of shelter for the poor changed since the seventeenth century? How are these changing attitudes reflected in public housing policy and public housing architecture? What does a detailed examination of three centuries of efforts to house Boston's impoverished residents suggest about political solutions to the need for low-cost housing?

Professor Vale deftly combines historical method with research techniques borrowed from anthropology, sociology, historical geography, and architecture. He utilizes a wide variety of primary sources ranging from laws of the seventeenth century Massachusetts Bay Colony to recent project files of the Boston Housing Authority (BHA). Census data, newspapers, local, state, and federal housing records and reports, site plans and archi-

tectural drawings, photographs, maps, and promotional material from public housing and urban renewal opponents and proponents also offered insight into attitudes with regard to housing the poor from the colonial period to the present.

Professor Vale found remarkable consistency in the "nature and extent of public obligation to socially and economically marginal people" with regard to housing. He shows that from the seventeenth century to the present, Americans have been ambivalent towards, and often hostile to, their collective responsibility to provide safe and affordable shelter to public neighbors. The legacy of this lack of commitment to housing the poor is visible in nearly every U.S. city where publicly subsidized housing developments are located. If Boston is typical of other cities, neither today, nor in the past, have publicly sponsored housing programs been successful in creating equilibrium between the supply and the demand for low-cost housing and eliminating the economic, political, social, and cultural barriers that limit public access to housing. Professor Vale offers his most compelling insights in Part I, "The Prehistory of Public Housing," which establishes a framework for understanding the scope and direction of the federal public housing program under President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal in 1933. In Chapter One, he surveys the lackluster local, state, and federal government efforts to address the housing needs of the impoverished from the seventeenth century to the 1920s. The Puritans were willing to shelter only those persons they deemed morally fit. Colonists deemed unworthy of public aid were sometimes "warned out" and dismissed from public responsibility altogether. The almshouses and other institutions erected by the Massachusetts Bay Colony and later, the City of Boston and the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, were architecturally foreboding institutions, built with miserly budgets in remote locations to discourage voluntary residence. In the centuries that followed, concern that aid might go to housing a slothful or dissolute individual remained as strong as it was among the Puritans. Nineteenth century tenement and settlement house reformers focused their efforts on those they considered the worthy poor -- upwardly mobile immigrant workers. They saw housing as part of the economic, political, and social complexion of the neighborhood, one of several views that would ultimately be adopted by public housing advocates in the 1930s.

Chapter Two reviewed the origins of the policies and practices that helped to make ownership of a detached dwelling in suburban or suburban-like location the American housing ideal. The Land Ordinance of 1785, the Homestead Act of 1862 and late nineteenth century federal land policies contributed to the transformation of the isolated homestead into a national housing archetype. Early twentieth century magazines such as the ***Ladies Home Journal*** placed plans and detailed cost descriptions for single-family homes into the hands of thousands of house-hungry readers. Wage earners were encouraged to purchase detached homes by housing developers, realtors, banks, employers and leaders of business and civic organizations through the Better Homes campaign during the 1920s. By contrast, organized labor counseled workers to approach the financial responsibilities that accompanied home ownership with care. By the outset of the Great Depression, detached housing was fixed as the national housing ideal. There was little widespread interest in the mass or modern housing approaches employed in Europe and in the U.S. at Radburn, New Jersey and other developments influenced by the "neighborhood concept" of planner Clarence Perry.

Part II, "Public Housing in Boston" considers complex national questions about the public housing program, its target population, and its influence upon the urban landscape of the largest city in New England. Chapter Three examined the public housing constructed by the BHA in the years immediately preceding and following World War II. Given the past policy approaches to the

sheltering of the poor, it is hardly surprising that housing officials adopted budgets that allowed for few, if any, project amenities. Regardless of how spartan many projects were, from the late 1930s to the mid-1950s, down-on-their-luck white families, war workers, and World War II veterans eagerly sought apartments in the most desirable public housing developments. Some used their connections to city politicians to obtain apartments at favored locations. Professor Vale showed how the BHA tried to stem local opposition to the construction of public housing by thwarting occupation by the neediest and least desirable public neighbors.

In Chapters Four and Five, Professor Vale examined the unraveling and partial reclamation of the BHA. During the 1960s and 1970s, the BHA's developments relinquished their function as temporary way stations to home ownership. Federal laws and court rulings increasingly prevented the BHA from denying housing to persons its staff members deemed undesirable and troublesome. As a result, the BHA followed the practice employed by dozens of public housing authorities nationwide and consolidated the least desirable public neighbors in certain public housing developments such as Mission Hill. Unable to demonstrate progress towards ending its racially discriminatory policies and practices, it was placed under the supervision of a court-appointed administrator in 1980. Around the same time, the BHA also joined the growing number of public housing authorities that contracted with private interests or resident groups to manage certain developments. Others, such as Columbia Point, were redeveloped, and the strategy met with mixed success. Chapter Five concludes with a discussion of some of the options open to the BHA, such as the expanded use of vouchers to address the ongoing housing needs of the city's impoverished. Observing that the large-scale public housing developments constructed forty to sixty years ago are gradually disappearing, Professor Vale predicted that they would ultimately "pass into historical memory like almshouses, bridewells, and Houses of Industry" (p. 392). What will remain after the projects are gone is the unfinished work of providing quality housing for those in need and our "collective ambivalence" for the task (p. 392).

From the Puritans to the Projects is an impressive work, both in terms of content and presentation. Part I could be strengthened by discussion of the extent of Puritan influence on housing policy for the poor in other locations beside Boston. In addition, it would be useful to know whether Spanish, French, or Dutch attitudes and practices regarding the housing of impoverished colonists had any influence on later policy. In Part II, readers might be better able to appreciate the tragedy of the BHA's inability to deal with postwar housing problems if a more richly contextualized picture of the Hub's postwar economic and social situation was presented. During the 1950s and 1960s, second-generation immigrants and African American workers faced declining opportunities for manufacturing jobs and other types of semi-skilled positions within the city itself. Automation and the decentralization of industrial production took place at the very time the population of the metropolitan region was becoming more diversified with the arrival of Spanish and later, Asian speaking immigrants. These observations aside, Professor Vale's book is a major contribution to recent scholarship on housing, urban history and public policy; its shelf-life will be long.

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