



## **Renewal Revisited: The Rise and Demise of Large-Scale Housing**

### **Complexes**

#### **Introduction**

This paper attempts a broad look at the rise and demise of the large-scale housing complexes of the post-war era, based on four case studies in four countries. While the terms and conditions under which each was realized differ, the ensembles were built in the same era, designed according to similar principles, and are slated for redevelopment for similar reasons. The case studies are Regent Park in Toronto, the Madden Wells Darrow complex in Chicago, the Bijlmermeer in Amsterdam and the Packington Estate in London. Being an abridged version of a longer work, this paper touches only on the North American examples.

#### **1. Toronto**

Regent Park, a 69-acre complex of public housing in downtown Toronto, was initiated by the City of Toronto in 1947. When completed a decade later, it comprised 2100 units in 56 buildings. As Canada's first great experiment with public housing, Regent Park was a textbook exercise in civic initiative and inter-governmental cooperation. Like many similar ventures, however, the complex slid into decline. Despite frequent calls for upgrades, Regent Park eluded the political radar. Arguably it made little sense to invest

in a complex whose basic tenets and underlying design principles had long been discredited.

As the complex neared its 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary, however, it was no longer possible defer life cycle investment. Real estate activity in the immediate area pointed to a market for residential development in what was long considered a marginal area of downtown. Toronto Community Housing Corporation (TCHC) saw an opportunity to leverage land value. The corporation proposed that the land be cleared and turned over to a developer to rebuild. The vision was to reconstruct the neighborhood at double the density – replacing all of the subsidized units and adding an equal number of market-rate units for sale. When the exact value of the land proved to be a point of dispute, a modified approach was adopted. Using its extensive land holdings as equity, TCHC obtained a bond rating enabling it to raise funds. TCHC then re-cast the Request for Proposals as a 50/50 collaboration with a private-sector developer and increased the target percentage of market rate units. This approach proved more propitious and TCHC formed a partnership with Daniels Corporation to redevelop the first of what will be six phases over the next decade.

The original Regent Park was conceived as a campus of buildings set in a relatively open landscape. Being markedly different from the neighborhood it replaced, it was to be something at which the community could point with pride. By contrast the redeveloped community has been designed to disappear. Paradoxically the structure of the new Regent Park will more closely resemble the neighborhood demolished in the 1940s than

the complex it is replacing. Indeed the degree to which the design of the resurrected Regent Park distances itself from the principles expressed in its post-war precursor underscores the contempt with which urban clearcutting is now regarded. The message seems virtually self-evident, namely, that reformers were misguided to have so recklessly razed the city and that neighborhoods should be put back.

More importantly, the urban principles on which Regent Park was built are widely considered to have contributed to its failure – or, at least, to have severely inhibited its ability to adapt to change. The bold new approach taken by modernists made these would-be oases unrecognizable as neighborhoods – a phenomenon that alienated inhabitants and contributed to anti-social behavior. There is consensus the relationship between buildings must be fixed – as must the relationship between the neighborhood and the larger city. For the second time in fifty years, then, the entire community will be erased.

The new Regent Park will be significantly denser when reconstructed. At build-out, the community will have increased from 2083 to 5100 units (of which 1500 will be managed by TCHC and 300 will be offered to qualified TCHC tenants for affordable ownership). The rent-geared-to-income (RGI) units not being replaced will be built elsewhere in the immediate neighborhood. The overall population of Regent Park will jump by 60%, from 7500 to 12,500 and the density will increase from 30 to 74 units per acre (UPA).<sup>1</sup> This increase in density will be offset by a corresponding increase in demographic diversity.

## 2. Chicago

Support for the redevelopment of large-scale housing estates in the United States coalesced in the 1990s under the HOPE VI program, administered through the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). HOPE VI – an acronym for “Housing Opportunities for People Everywhere” – evolved from earlier revitalization/demonstration grants, largely geared toward transforming single-demographic housing ensembles into mixed-demographic communities. Conceived as a comprehensive strategy to address an increasingly distressed public housing stock, HOPE VI identified high-rise family housing as especially ripe for redevelopment.<sup>2</sup>

Aggregations of this kind proved the least sustainable from both a social and economic perspective. Given the fractious political climate under which HOPE VI was conceived, however, the program was marketed as a final injection of federal money into a long-disgraced public housing stock. In exchange for this last hurrah, local authorities would design a way out of the juggernaut to which they’d been consigned, namely, maintaining a collapsing housing stock with diminishing support. Using cleared land as a calling card, local authorities could partner with the private sector to explore alternatives.

The history of public housing in North America might be described as the evolution from *hand up* to *handout* to *handover*. What was justified during the Depression as a hand up for the temporarily disadvantaged became, by the 1960s, housing of last resort. The average length of stay increased and household incomes dropped. The decline in rental revenue severely compromised local authorities’ ability to maintain the housing. In reaction, vacancy rates increased and rental income dropped further.

Despite being managed differently, Toronto Community Housing Corporation's approach to the redevelopment of Regent Park closely parallels the approach for similar redevelopments formulated under HOPE VI. By order of magnitude, however, Chicago is undertaking ten times the volume of reconstruction as Toronto<sup>3</sup>. With metropolitan population equivalent to that of Toronto, CHA has committed to redeveloping all 25,000 of its occupied units under the current *Plan for Transformation*. About 2/3 (or 16,000) of these units will be integrated into fourteen mixed-income communities rising on the ashes of the most notorious of Chicago's modernist ghettos. As of 2008, terms of reference had been developed for nine of these communities and construction had begun on seven.

Moreover, the 25,000 units in question do not include those that were vacant when the *Plan for Transformation* was approved in the late 1990s. Taking these into account, Chicago Housing Authority will renovate, reinvent or eliminate its entire stock of 40,000 units in one fell swoop (i.e., within a single decade). Several factors contribute to the decision to do so much so quickly. The volume of reconstruction reflects to the immense volume of units built by the CHA in the post-war period – all of which proved difficult to maintain and have reached the end of their life cycle. It also relates to the fact that so much of CHA housing was aggregated into high-concentrated ensembles. Most importantly, it's a function of the availability of HOPE VI renewal grants. Without the means to properly maintain and the right to sell or otherwise dispose of property acquired with federal monies,<sup>4</sup> local housing authorities in the US had long been handcuffed. HOPE VI presented a window of opportunity, a 'now-or-never' exit strategy, and the possibility of a wholesale *handover*.

For both Toronto and Chicago, the developer-driven mixed-demographic/mixed tenancy community is a new and relatively edgy concept. But while Regent Park is located in a dense, comparatively mixed urban neighborhood in which the redevelopment will be effectively more of the same, the Chicago equivalents (with the exception of Cabrini-Green) are in low-density, largely single-demographic areas with low percentages of ownership. This will affect both the prices that units will be able to command and the target demographic. Whereas, like Regent Park, the for-sale units will be marketed to first-time homebuyers, young families are being targeted in Chicago. And because middle-class families with children are notoriously difficult to attract to the city, the Chicago developments are targeting African American and Hispanic families. These groups were most closely connected to these areas in the post-war period.

For the purposes of this study, I've examined two of the mixed-income developments underway in Chicago, namely the ABLA complex on the west side and the Madden Wells Darrow complex to the south. ABLA (an acronym for an aggregation comprising the Jane Addams Homes, Robert H. Brooks Homes and Brooks Extension, Loomis Courts, and the Grace Abbott Apartments) has been reborn and re-branded as Roosevelt Square, a mixed-income, mixed-tenancy community. Built out over a 30-year period, ABLA included everything from PWA walk-ups and wartime housing to high rises adrift in open fields. Like Regent Park, ABLA's location worked in its favor to the extent that it was relatively close to the Loop, convenient to the highway, and adjacent to the campus of the University of Illinois at Chicago.

At build-out ABLA comprised 3235 units, 66% of which were vacant by the mid-1990s. In its reincarnation as Roosevelt Square, the community will include 3147 units. This slight reduction in numbers represents a larger drop in overall population, to the extent that market-rate households are smaller than those of subsidized families. The decrease is, of course, relative to ABLA's heyday in the 1970s, not to its largely abandoned state immediately prior to redevelopment. All of the 1097 subsidized units that were occupied pre-demolition will be replaced and 1883 for-sale units will be added – 966 market-rate and 917 affordable units.

Like ABLA, Madden Wells Darrow was an aggregation of four separate ensembles: the Ida B. Wells Homes, the Wells Extension, the Clarence Darrow Homes and Madden Park Homes. Completed in 1941, the Wells Homes included 1662 units, 868 of which were flats in 3-story walkups and 794 of which were row houses. Wells was the first federally funded housing project built exclusively for African Americans. The Wells Extension was added in the mid '50s and comprised 641 units in ten, seven-story buildings. In 1961 the Clarence Darrow Houses were built. 479 apartments were divided between four, fourteen-story buildings. The last component, the Madden Park Homes, was built in 1970. It housed 450 families in ten buildings and was the last large-scale housing complex built by the Chicago Housing Authority. The aggregate Madden Wells Darrow complex comprised 3232 units on 92 acres (approximately 35 UPA), 2200 (or 68%) of which were occupied when the *Plan for Transformation* was approved. It is currently being redeveloped as a mixed-demographic community called Oakwood Shores.

Given that very little public housing was built in Chicago after the mid 1970s – indeed little housing of any kind was built around the core – these new communities were poised to appear on a relatively empty stage. This vacuum, combined with a determination to set a more socially and economically sustainable course, demanded a set of design guidelines. As it happens, the US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) collaborated with Congress of the New Urbanism (CNU) to formulate these guidelines. In the late 1990s the CNU produced a document entitled “Principles for Inner-City Neighborhood Design,” identifying fourteen points to guide the shaping of HOPE VI mixed-demographic redevelopments.

New Urbanism coalesced the 1990s as a set of strategies to battle low-density, single-demographic, automobile-dependent development on the suburban periphery. Its champions formulated the twenty-seven-point *Charter of the New Urbanism* to fill the ideological gap left by the discredited Charter of Athens<sup>5</sup> and to re-integrate the disciplines of architecture and urban planning. With this new *Charter* the New Urbanists have endeavored to distill what was best about early 20<sup>th</sup> century suburbs into a holistic and urbane set of principles to guide the development of the contemporary suburban periphery.

While buildings associated with New Urbanism are often decried as nostalgic or reactionary, something more profound is at play in Chicago. Eschewing even a passing reference to anything modern, buildings fall back on long established, pre-modernist Chicago housing types. It would appear that the goal is not only to put the



neighborhoods back, but to pretend that they never disappeared. That said, Oakwood Shores is not an exercise in historical reconstruction. Not only would this be beyond the scope and well beyond the budget of the project at hand but it might make the community stand out.

Several observations may be relevant in this regard. To understand what is at play in these mixed-demographic redevelopments we must remind ourselves of the degree to which modernism is seen to have stigmatized the poor. While the middle class fled to the suburbs and blue-collar hold-outs in Chicago barred African Americans from their soon-to-be-abandoned communities, the poor were hustled into towers and conscripted as citizens of a brave new world. As it transpired, housing towers – especially in great concentrations – proved particularly ill suited to the demographic they were asked to accommodate. Over time these high-rise projects became increasingly conspicuous – a result of their scale, their proximity to major highways, their reputation, and the fact that the neighborhoods around them vaporized. As a consequence virtually every aspect of post-war modernism– its planning principles, predilection for towers, and stylistic proclivities – has come to symbolize all that is bad about cities. This is ironic given that the goal of modernism was to save the city by reinventing it.

In reaction to the reaction to modernism, Roosevelt Square and Oakwood Shores appear to have been designed to avoid any prospect of stigmatization. The communities not only disappear into adjacent neighborhoods but exclude any form, detail, color, material, scale or suggestion of intention at which someone might be able to point. At the same time

buildings manage to avoid being so banal as to invite criticism or otherwise attract attention. The communities are compelling studies in disappearance and dissimulation.

Arguably budget constraints for these developments precluded the involvement of well-known architects (i.e., those a reputation for pushing boundaries). Indeed, architecture was not the point – or at least not the main point. CNU’s “Principles for Inner-City Neighborhood Design” obviated the need for architects – mitigating both the risk and benefit of involving them. This is in contrast to Regent Park, for which well-publicized competitions were held and around which TCHC/Daniels Corporation have worked to create a “buzz.”

For the Chicago Housing Authority visibility was tantamount to stigmatization. The lesson of the post-war decades was that public housing should neither stand out nor in any way resemble a social experiment. Ideally CHA housing would not be identifiable, whether by its form or by virtue of its isolation. Stakes were equally high for the private sector partners. Even were the land made available free of charge, negative demand for housing in the immediate areas, coupled with the edgy idea of integrating market-rate with subsidized units for what were potentially “problem” households, amounted to more than enough risk. The role of the architecture, then, would be to reassure, to draw as little attention to itself as possible, to look as snug and familiar as feasible within the constraints of the budget. The driving presumption is that the poor want the same things as the middle class, which is notoriously conservative with respect to housing choices.

Many of the units in Roosevelt Square and Oakwood Shores are being marketed to families with children – for whom a more traditional image of home trumps urban edginess and who, like their subsidized counterparts, benefit from living close to the ground. Young families have long gravitated to the suburbs where demographics are predictable, schools are superior and house prices lower. To attract them to the core it is necessary to provide a recognizable and compelling vision of community while keeping prices down. This is no mean feat in the best of circumstances; it's an even greater challenge given the diversity of the demographic.

Perhaps the most important point to make in this regard is that Roosevelt Square and Oakwood Shores are conceived primarily as fabric. This may reflect the predominantly blighted canvas on which they are appearing. But while the buildings are unremarkable (neither compelling nor offensive), obvious thought and investment have been put into infrastructure (crosswalks, sidewalks, iron fences, street plantings, front yards, foundation plantings, etc.). The larger message is that streets – a source of frustration for modernists – are more significant than the buildings along them. The correlate message is that the role of architecture is must be reconsidered, that the primary function of buildings is to define, connect to, and communicate with the street.

Figures have given way to fabric. Oakwood Shores and Roosevelt Square have been designed to disappear into the city – with the hope that the city will reappear in the process.

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<sup>1</sup> Source: Toronto Community Housing Corporation.

<sup>2</sup> HOPE VI:

- Includes separate demolition and revitalization grants.
- Provides funding for acquisition of new sites/properties in order to manage the logistics of dismantling large-scale complexes.
- Relieved Housing Authorities of the “one-for-one replacement” rule instituted with the Housing Act of 1937.
- Relaxed some income caps in order to encourage more economically stable tenants to remain in housing complexes.
- Establishes minimum income requirements to control the percentages of severely disadvantaged tenants.
- Provides additional support for Section 8 housing (housing choice) vouchers – with the larger goal of de-concentrating poverty.
- Provides funding for additional social services; attempts to address the problem (poverty) not just the symptoms (inability to afford market housing).
- Helps housing authorities to more effectively deal with management and maintenance of their holdings.
- Permits the transfer of public lands to the private sector to enable housing authorities to partner with private-sector developers to build mixed demographic communities.

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- Includes “Main Street Revitalization” program to permit communities to incorporate affordable housing into existing main streets.

<sup>3</sup> Toronto Community Housing Corporation owns and manages 58,500 units (source: TCHC website, 2009). In North America is it second only to New York City as a provider of social housing.

<sup>4</sup> This proscription was written into the Wagner-Steagall Act of 1937 – under which federal money for public housing was first provided to municipalities.

<sup>5</sup> The Athens Charter came out of the Congress international d’architecture modern’s (CIAM) Functional City Congress in 1933. As later documented by Le Corbusier, the Charter laid out a 95-point program for the planning and construction of cities.