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Voices of Home in Bluegrass-Aspendale: Constructing the Ideal

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I am a senior majoring in Architecture, a Gaines Fellow, and a member of the Honors Program. I am the former President of the College of Design Student Council and of the Honors Program Student Council, a member of the Honors Program Ambassador Team, leader of the Isaac Murphy Memorial Garden design project, speaker at the Lafayette Seminar on Public Issues, student in the Rotterdam Summer Studio with Dean Mohney, a marathon runner, and a performing DJ. I received a Kentucky Historical Society Technical Grant and a Clay Lancaster Fellowship.

Next year I will continue my research on housing as an intern at Mecanoo Architecten in Delft, Holland. My responsibilities at the firm, one of the world’s leading architecture groups, will involve the research and design of housing. After researching the history of social housing in my hometown of Lexington, Kentucky, I hope to learn from the progressive and visionary nature of the Dutch. Eventually, I hope to put the knowledge I gain overseas and in graduate school to use to help realize affordable and “designed” housing in the Bluegrass. This project has tied together my love of architecture and love of place. I have learned a great deal about the design of research and how this process can translate into architectural proposals. I presented my preliminary findings at “Posters at the Capitol: Undergraduate Research Showcase” in Frankfort last year.

This project, my Senior Thesis as a Gaines Fellow, was a tremendous learning experience. After dedicating many hours to reading secondary literature, reading microfilms, talking with community leaders, and writing many drafts, I have learned about the difficulty and excitement that comes with serious scholarship. My committee chair, Dr. Wallis Miller, was a great help in guiding my research, defining the scope of my project, and carefully reading and re-reading all of my material. She was a steady and inspiring voice in the pursuit of a clear, well-thought out and engaging paper. The assistance of my committee and the Gaines Center for the Humanities helped me realize a difficult project that will hopefully influence real policy in Lexington.

Mentor:
Wallis Miller, Ph.D.,
Charles Parker Graves Endowed Associate Professor in Architecture

Matt’s work on Bluegrass-Aspendale combines solid textual research with a serious commitment to oral history. Taking a long-lived and long-ignored housing project in Lexington as his subject, Matt at once embraced the project as an object and confronted this object with the people who lived in and around it. The task of integrating moving oral histories with research on national housing policy, local political decisions, and architectural character was a difficult one; in the end, Matt found a very powerful way of juxtaposing them. The project was as much an encounter with a wide variety of source material as it is a very valuable contribution to Lexington culture that has political as well as intellectual significance.
Introduction
To those citizens unable to secure market-rate housing, the future of affordable housing in Lexington, KY, looms largely in their minds. Lexington has one of the nation’s most extended histories with fair and affordable housing. The Bluegrass-Aspendale housing project in the city’s East End neighborhood makes up a significant portion of that history. As part of the nation’s first attempts at public housing, it has experienced the extent of public housing’s tumultuous history. Recently destroyed, the future development of the project’s site has been the subject of a highly contentious debate. In looking at the memory of the former project, through the lenses of several voices, this paper attempts to insert an important body of knowledge into the discussion of urban renewal. It acknowledge that the complex history of Bluegrass-Aspendale will not be told through one narrator, but the collage of many layered voices.

A Set of Remarkable Circumstances
“The government is more than empty form.”
— Senator Robert Wagner (D. NY), testimony before congress concerning the 1937 Housing Act.

Bluegrass-Aspendale, located on the old Bluegrass-Association Racing Track, or “the federal housing project” as it was referenced locally, was one of the first 52 public housing projects supported by federal financing and authorized through a national housing policy. The housing movement, which had lost steam during the middle of the 1920s due to apathy on the part of the middle class, was given new life during the Great Depression and its shortage of labor opportunities (McDonnell, 1957, p. 22). “Housers,” as housing advocates were termed, took advantage of the newfound social progressiveness to lobby for housing’s inclusion in New Deal legislation. Politicians obliged, anxious to support homebuilding and job creation. Bluegrass-Aspendale was realized beneath a complex umbrella of federal, state, and local action, indicative of social views toward the role of housing.

The National Scene
The Housing Division within the Federal Emergency Administration of the Public Works Administration (PWA) was initially authorized by the National Industrial Recovery Act of 1933, and existed primarily to spark the construction industry, one of the sectors hardest hit by the Great Depression (Lykins, n.d., p. 4). The PWA faced the responsibility, distinct from other relief agencies, of financing needed public works of “durable social value” (Badger, 1989, p. 21). The creation of the housing division was based on Title II – Public Works and Construction Projects, Sec. 202, which gave the administration “control of low-cost housing and slum-clearance projects” (Duke, 1934, p. 186). Harold Ickes assumed the position of director of the PWA, and took a famously firm hand in controlling its operations. The first six projects authorized by this agency were built with private capital outlays, as loans made to limited-dividend corporations to construct low-income housing privately (McDonnell, 1957, p. 36). After those projects were approved, Ickes decided that this method was an unsatisfactory means of providing low-rent housing (Lykins, n.d., p. 8). The private agencies were not capable of building units within the low-income price range. In 1934, he moved to legally incorporate the Public Works Emergency Housing Corporation in individual states so that local agencies could erect federally financed housing (PWA, 1936, p. 27). The biggest hurdle for the PWA in acting locally was the legality of the federal government exercising eminent domain.

State and local officials across the nation resisted the idea of condemning property for housing. On January 4, 1935, a judge in Louisville ruled that the PWA housing division could not exercise eminent domain, because housing did not constitute a “public use” (PWA, 1936, p. 31). This decision against the government nearly halted the prospect of public housing, especially given the decision’s proximity to Lexington. Thankfully, in the progressive state of New York, housers were able to argue for a positive ruling in the case of New York City Housing Authority v. Muller. The decision upheld low-cost housing and slum clearance as “public uses,” and seemed to contradict the Louisville case (McDonnell, 1957, p. 47). The PWA housing division felt confident that this verdict authorized them to enact its long-contemplated program of public housing and slum clearance. By November of 1935, 51 projects were approved for construction under the National Industrial Recovery Act and the Emergency Relief Appropriations Act of 1935, which provided $450 million toward housing. Lexington was appropriated $1,704,000 dollars for “286 row houses.”

Figure 1.
Aerial View of Bluegrass-Aspendale Site. (http://maps.google.com, March 27, 2007)
Just prior to this development within the Public Works Administration, Congress passed the 1934 Housing Act. Though important for authorizing the Federal Housing Authority, a government mortgage-insurance agency, the new act had little bearing on Lexington’s drive to realize public housing. The FHA did not build an office in Lexington until the early 1950s. The PWA was, for the first several years, the primary developer of federal housing. The greatest impact of the 1934 Act was felt as it spurred local and state agencies to authorize and create local housing commissions. The municipal agencies that were created helped facilitate the monumental 1937 Housing Act, which formed the groundwork for the federal government’s massive experiment in low-income housing.

Lexington’s Stake
Before federal assistance came to fruition in Lexington, the correction of housing inadequacies was deemed a parochial concern. Private entities were supposed to show civic concern for those in need. For example, in 1919, a $50,000 Stock Company was formed to build homes for the needy (Lexington Herald, 2/20/19). Also, in 1920, banks offered to back investments that would be used to expand the housing supply (Lexington Herald, 3/31/20). Ensuring racial equality, a superficial goal given the presence of Jim Crow laws, was also not a mandated goal. In 1920, when racial divisions were still defined by tightly grouped clusters throughout the community, public opinion held that the betterment of the housing stock for black residents was a concern for the paternalistic charity of his or her employer.

White residents could be assured steady and efficient negro domestic help by building their servants substantial homes with living comforts tending to make happiness. By the plan the servants would buy the homes, paying for them out of their wages on the installment plan. Razing the negro settlements in the heart of white residence territory and the building of substantial homes for the negroes, for sale on the installment plan, in the outskirts of the city, would provide more ample space for white homes and improve negro living conditions. This plan may be adopted in the campaign for housing relief here. A subdivision for negroes is now being opened on the Georgetown pike. Lots are being sold on the installment plan at a rate intended to be in reach of the better classes of the negro race (Lexington Herald, 4/9/20).

By exterminating the black presence in downtown, both parties would have “better” conditions, an ironic twist to the current, inverse distribution of race. Into the 1930s, areas such as Davis Bottom, Brucetown, Pralltown, and Irishtown were still home to dilapidated frame houses and unsanitary conditions. Housing was always seen as a local problem demanding local solutions. Even the recent national legislation was seen as lubrication for the easy division into black and white portions, even eliminating of messy relocations. Its size also facilitated the large qualitative gap of a potential transaction, the lack of buildings, and the driving force behind the Commission (Lykins, n.d., p. 37).

In a time when “shacks” and “fine old homes” defined the housing stock, the role of the housing commission was to equalize the large qualitative gap between the two extremes. The endeavor was as much about improving the image of Lexington, one report indicated that several companies decided to move their business elsewhere because of unsightly conditions (Lexington Herald, 3/11/37). Though involved with diverse populations, the agency was not directly interested in redressing racial inequalities. Without the widespread shortage of employment and the dramatic loss of housing stock for whites during the economic downturn, public housing might never have been so initially successful.

The last challenge in realizing the new housing project was finding an appropriate site, originally assumed to be Irishtown, on the western side of town. For that site to work, 80 black families would require relocation and their homes to be condemned.

… that there will be no problem in removing the colored people from the proposed project area, especially if the work is undertaken this fall during tobacco harvesting season. The majority of families living within this area work in the tobacco fields and there are plenty of vacancies available on the various plantations outside of the city to handle the problem …

— E.K. McComb (LMHC) (Lykins, n.d., p. 40)

The Irishtown site was popular for its established contextual amenities, such as schools, stores and playgrounds. However, after the Louisville Case questioned the use of eminent domain for public housing, the local commission decided to investigate the potential of more open sites. The Bluegrass Association Track had recently moved to a rural location on Jack Keene’s farm, the leftover parcel included 66 acres of relatively open land. The association stipulated that the entire 66-acre tract be purchased at the asking price of $1000 an acre, not in pieces (Lexington Herald, 8/1/35). The advantages of this site were the simplicity of a potential transaction, the lack of buildings, and the elimination of messy relocations. Its size also facilitated the easy division into black and white portions, even Municipal Housing Commission (LHC) promptly after its formation (Lexington Herald, 6/26/34). The members during this time included C.M. Marshall, president of Union Bank & Trust Company; Washington Reed; Henry Milward, of the Milward Funeral Home family; and Dr. Frank McVey, President of the University of Kentucky. Hugh Meriwether, the city’s architect, was considered the driving force behind the Commission (Lykins, n.d., p. 37).
though the white elementary school was some distance away. The familiarity of whites to the area due to its thoroughbred heritage made the racial balance socially adaptable. Even though the East End had a dense grouping of African-American enclaves, it was yet to be identified as a “black ghetto.”

Opposition to the project came from questions about government intrusion in the private market. The real estate industry, on both local and national levels, organized to protest the construction of housing. The National Association of Real Estate Brokers, formed to shore up the interest of private homebuilders, provided the most organized front to the legislative movement. Their influence affected important details of public housing, including the selection of tenants and the rate schedule (U.S. Housing Act, 1937, p. 84). In Lexington, property owners in Irwintown, expecting to receive large governmental windfalls after the condemnation, were irate about the switched location of the housing project. Others in real estate feared that the artificially lowered rents would create unfair competition to private property owners. The school board also objected to the site, unless the Housing Commission financed a new school for white students (Lykins, n.d., p. 46). Racial protests, though infrequent, were a part of the dialogue. B.J. Treacy, a self-proclaimed “property owner” said that:

This program contemplates 300 new housing units for whites and negroes, almost evenly divided. This is impractical and undesirable. Similar plans may work in other sections of the United States, but close communion of whites and negroes in Lexington, Kentucky is unworkable (Lexington Herald, 11/30/35).

The advantages to the former racetrack’s site proved greatest. The PWA agreed to build the first public housing in Kentucky on this site, a decision that would affect much of Lexington’s future public housing development. Because the entire tract was purchased, the Housing Commission was obligated to develop the entire site as a new urban space, and has done so over a period of 70 years.

The community supported the Commission’s purchase because of the economic condition of the country. The public had become used to unemployment and poverty as widespread effects of the stock market’s crash. Social charity and government intervention had become common and accepted means of intervention. “… the Great Depression provided the occasion for the first sustained, overt federal interventions in the housing market … this helped overcome the philosophical reservations about lending a supporting hand. And it created a large constituency for public assistance” (Mitchell, 1985, p. 6). That constituency in Lexington was anxious to offer their opinions as to the appropriateness of the new housing. The press’s coverage of the planning stages put the project high on the community’s radar. Even negative commentary was helpful, because it gave the process a sense of transparency. The biggest criticism was directed toward the relatively high rents.

The Emergency Relief Act’s requirements stated that the new housing must operate with solvency, so as to cover its recurring costs. The national PWA office, with the local commission’s help, set rents late in 1937 (PWA, 1936, p. 58). While the newspaper anxiously covered discussion about the rent schedule, a split between national and local officials grew over the way and the schedule that those rates were decided. The initial rents, set at roughly $7.67 per room, were higher than most poor individuals could afford in Lexington. The local commission felt disenfranchised when the rents were announced, even to the extent that the entire board threatened to resign (Lykins, n.d., p.78). They had hoped to play a greater consulting role in the setting of rates. The challenge of realizing a self-sustaining project created the first instance of discrimination.

Construction began on the project August 9, 1936, with a projected completion date of early summer 1937. Initially managed by Kent E. Kerns, the local project would finally open on January 8, 1938, after delays caused by the great deluge of 1937. Under the original agreement with the PWA, federal outlays financed the construction of the project until the local commission took control under a 60-year lease. The LMHC signed this agreement on Christmas Day, 1937, just under two months after the passage of the United States Housing Act of 1937, which authorized the creation of the United States Housing Authority, the new governing body for federal public housing (Lexington Herald, 12/26/37; McDonnell, 1957, p. 402). Federal oversight shifted from the PWA to the newly formed USHA. Even though it was built by an agency tied to the Great Depression, Bluegrass-Aspendale became part of the federal government’s long-term program for social housing.

The Beginning of This Story
Jackson Jackson’s family originated in Kentucky, his father was from Scott County and his mother hailed from the Crab-Orchard area. They came to Lexington in the early 1930s as farm laborers on his grandfather’s farm at Coldstream. His father would find work as a maintenance worker.

We moved from the farm to Whitney Avenue here on the West End of Lexington. I began my schooling at Booker T. Washington Elementary School. We moved into East End on DeWeese St. near Short. The idea was that, my father was working at the Old Schultz United Department Store, and of course it was on Main St. and that was closer to his work. We moved subsequently of course to Aspendale, and I suppose that’s the beginning of this story (Jackson interview, 1/18/07).

Mr. Jackson, or “Junebug,” as most Lexingtonians know him, lived in Bluegrass-Aspendale from 1939 until 1949, at which point he left for college and his parents moved to Illinois. He was cognizant of the project’s construction during the mid-1930s, but does not remember the community’s overall sentiment about it. Before living in Aspendale (most interviewees referred to the place as “Aspendale” and not by the hyphenated title, indicative of the physical and social separation between the Parks), Mr. Jackson lived in a house on DeWeese St., rented by his parents and in poor enough
A cursory look at the occupants of the project would give you to understand that what you had was a very middle class group of individuals. The problem was always adequate housing. So that I know that the application process, from what I could glean as a child, was necessary because they were concerned about who would be coming in initially. Now later on in life I would learn how you make programs succeed, and that’s one way you do it [an application process] (Jackson interview, 1/18/07).

Mr. Jackson’s initial reaction to the new living situation was favorable. The pleasure of living in Aspendale was greatest for children, beneficiaries of the open green space and educational programs.

The place was full of young people and children. And of course not having any siblings, I was just delighted to find the others there” (Jackson interview, 1/18/07)

Many of the resources and advantages of the facility were geared toward nurturing children, educationally and recreationally, especially because the project held a high density of young people. With most parents working long hours, the children developed a rich social network. The children typically stayed within their own respective park but found moments for interaction.

Let me tell you a story. If you know the layout … Bluegrass Park children going to high school would come down Pemberton, to Race, to Third, probably to Walton, and to school. We came straight out of the project, Fifth Street, to Dunbar. As children are want to do, we would meet in the back of Aspendale and Bluegrass. There were times when we got along famously and there were some times that we tossed clods at one another. Very child-like, not racial. I can distinctly remember tossing clods, and then running home you see (Jackson interview, 1/18/07).

Mr. Jackson quickly pointed out that the child’s perspective was not necessarily tinged with the idea of race, but gave priority to an innate sense of competition. For the children there, race did not define the same boundary as the tall barbed-wire fence between Aspendale and Bluegrass Parks. Officials seemed to understand that this communal home environment could nurture the growth of children in profound ways. Real initiatives on the part of the groundskeepers, the staff, and the residents kept the facility programmed with activities, games, and events.
We had marvelous facilities for sports. In fact, Kloosterman and Arnsparger (the groundskeeper and the facilities manager) helped us build our softball diamond. They built the backstop and everything and we dragged things around, and flattened it, and made it a very good softball diamond. And that’s one thing. We also had horseshoe pits, we had basketball courts, and initially we had tennis courts. And they were lit up at night, so that we always had someplace to go and be. We participated in the recreation leagues around town. And I can remember one fellow who coached us in softball, a Mr. Herman … so we had that beautiful kind of tight knit community (Jackson interview, 1/18/07).

In Mr. Jackson’s time, the facilities were kept up with immaculate care, especially because rents were set at a level commensurate with its maintenance costs. As an anxious public and federal government looked upon the site for signs of success, the condition of its grounds was of no little importance. Compared to his previous home on Deweese and Coral Streets, the relative quality and comfort of this new home was exceptional.

Well, I had lived in, I suppose all wooden houses to that point. The facilities in Aspendale were far and above, I guess, more comfortable than the homes I had lived in, I think mainly because of the excellent construction of the place there. We had moved from having fireplaces that brought heat as opposed to the other amenities … coal and kindling to steam heat, it was generated from a central power source to the individual units. And so we were very comfortable there.

You walked into a living room area and the stairs went straight up from there. You had a living room and a large kitchen, that, you would also use that for your dining. We had two bedrooms and a bath upstairs, ok. The stove and refrigerator were supplied, so they were there. As I recall, the flooring was, I suppose tile, now the composition I’m not sure, but I know it was excellent because it didn’t deteriorate, it stayed while I was there. So I would say, it was very, very compact, it was still comfortable. You had an excellent play area and those amenities close to it. But not a lot of space. I remember casement tile windows (Jackson interview, 1/18/07).

Mr. Jackson’s day was typical of most families within or outside the projects and revolved around schooling. Education was reinforced by both parental support and the social aims of the community.

We arose, had breakfast, I went to school, my father went to Avon, Kentucky. My mother was a housewife. Upon returning, she would have the meals ready, my father would soon come in, and on occasion he would do extra work, he might go out and back again. That was it, we were just the average family. They would want to know whether I did my homework. We did take our meals together, so that if I had issues I could bring them up (Jackson interview, 1/18/07).

The project did not just provide a place to live but a community full of activities, sponsored by the housing commission.

We were buttressed by the educational atmosphere in this community. The library would send a lady, and I can only think of her last name, Mrs. Coleman, and she would come and read to the very small children. Now those of us that understand the value of the educational process can see the value in that (Jackson interview, 1/18/07).

The physical landscape was well-tended to by the pair of dedicated maintenance workers charged with keeping the place looking good and supplying the residents with communal gardening equipment to tend to their individual yards.

One of the things that went on there, was the fact that there were two gentlemen who served as the, I suppose, maintenance persons for the projects. I still remember their names because to me they were Mr. Kloosterman and Mr. Arnsparger. And they kept the place going. They also kept, repaired, the lawnmowers. And if you needed one, you checked it out, cut your grass or lawn and so forth. Now, the lawns were very well kept. It’s unfortunate that in future times the place was overcrowded and it didn’t look a thing like it did when I lived there (Jackson interview, 1/18/07).

The ritual of daily life was marked by common celebrations among residents and neighbors. Even though part of Aspendale, Mr. Jackson nevertheless felt connected to the African-American community throughout Lexington. The experiences of shopping and worshipping connected groups within the project to larger geographic areas.

We had places to play. We had the playgrounds for all size children … and they would all meet there. And kindred souls, I suppose, would bond …

The office area became a social gathering place as well. I can distinctly remember stepping on the floor to dance with a young lady and grabbing the wrong hand and she promptly corrected me.

We interacted at school. Not all friendships formed were solely with children from the project. Some of my friends lived all over town and we are friends to this day. And so it was a very regular life.
I know the Fourth of July, one must come to Douglas Park to celebrate, OK. But then there were those times, like Halloween, when the community would have the children into the office space and we’d dip for apples and those kinds of things.

I went to church at Shiloh, very important. Now, you were undegirded at each place. We were taught something about living and how to do that at church. We were also pointed in various directions by church members as they could assist us. The schools were far more adept at teaching children than maybe anybody really knew.

There were markets, well two markets, on Fifth Street, right at Fifth and Chestnut. There was Owen’s Grocery and Arthur’s Market. And they were both on the corner there. As memory serves me, we also went to an A&P store, on Main St. Everybody utilized the same sources (black and white) (Jackson interview, 1/18/07).

The time that Mr. Jackson lived in Aspendale was a period of relative social respect. In later years, grocery stores would exclude by race, one on Sixth Street served the white part of the project while the one on Race St. served the black community. This simple but telling division did not plague the first era the project’s history. Mr. Jackson believes this initial society benefited from the village concept, or the benevolence imbued into the project by its designer. The harmony also came from the perspective of the country, mired in a war overseas against a shared enemy.

The Second World War was a time of commitment and sacrifice by everyone in this country. And, somehow or the other, as we passed each other we could determine or detect that we didn’t have each other as enemies, we had a common enemy. And as a result, and I believe history will bear me out, the Second World War was the beginning of the real thrust toward equality in this country.

The village concept was very much intact there. Education was stressed in that community. It was all a very good time for me. And I don’t know anyone there who lived with that had any problems being there.

Everybody knew everybody else. And I’ll throw this name around to give you some idea about the village concept. Now, this man and woman were not related to any of us up there, but it was “Uncle Prince Overstreet” and “Aunt Maggie Overstreet.” Now that’s only one example, because everybody else functions the same way, but if you had gotten out of hand and they saw you, oh you were handled right there and sent home. So we were well looked after (Jackson interview, 1/18/07).

If the layout of the housing units created a certain sense of communal cohesion, the staff supported that shared mission. Problems were attended to when needed and relationships were formed between the staff and the residents.

They maintained them and responded immediately. Did not have problems like that. I believe I said earlier that Kloosterman and Arnsparger saw to it. So you didn’t have rusty pipes or running water, none of that. If you look at those homes, the shed type roofs over the porches – copper. The roof was of course, tile. And I would almost wager that there weren’t ten cracks in those old original buildings, when they tore them down (Jackson interview, 1/18/07).

One of Mr. Jackson’s most memorable stories involves his relationship with that management of the project. This account is of significance because it contrasts with the changing interaction between residents and management in future years, when distance and neglect characterized the relationship. Mr. Jackson describes his humorous anecdote of “good government:”

Initially, the man’s name was Jack Bryan. Subsequently it was Connie Griffith, and I believe we have some buildings here named for her (the public housing towers for the elderly on Jefferson). Now let me tell you a little story. As I told you I went on to college and did some things and finally became the state’s first minority groups representative, and I took complaints all over the state. I got a complaint from the Bluegrass-Aspendale area. And after all these years, I walked into the office. And I stated that I was there, who I was, and the agency from which I had come. And from the back office came this, ‘Mr. Jackson Junior, come back in here.’ (shouting). It was Mrs. Connie Griffith, she had remembered me after all those years. And I was still Mr. Jackson Junior (Jackson interview, 1/18/07).

Mr. Jackson emphasizes the personal connections that the staff made with residents. Interestingly enough, although his anecdote relates to a case of minority discrimination, he seemed to forget this in favor of Ms. Griffith’s kind words.

The stigma of social housing was deflated, as mentioned, by an era of government support and national pride. Mr. Jackson firmly brushed off any thoughts of shame attached to his life in Aspendale, for it seemed to him a wholly normal way to live, rife with advantages. An embedded stigma would grow with the project’s later years as its social enthusiasm collapsed into a social “pathology.” Mr. Jackson described the unique community of Bluegrass-Aspendale as being normal, from the perspective of a resident.

Owing to that time, and because as I have said, we had teachers, we had insurance executives, we had barbers and beauticians, we had contractors that lived there, government workers, and just regular workers. And I must hasten to tell you that there was not the stigma of...
being there, at that time. One of the reason’s was, this community, this country knew it had a problem that was not of a person’s making. As I told you, not only were we middle class, we certainly were with a value system. We had the value system, what we didn’t have was a place to be. An example — right where we are living now, we came here (to their current house) in about 1964 or somewhere about in there. And African-American’s were still being guided into certain areas, if you want to look at the community I can point that out to you. So we are just now coming around. But you see, we’re middle class up here, our children are all college, they’re doing well. But we still have got a way to go. So there was no stigma for us in that project, because you see, we had the teachers and everybody there, so we had the community there. He connects his experience in Bluegrass-Aspendale to the larger struggle of African-Americans in the housing market. So even if there were stigma attached to living there, the advantages it offered far surpassed the uncertainty of dealing with an unfriendly real estate market. Wright (1981) considers the PWA’s venture into public housing as a stepping-stone for those unable to own their own home. It was not intended for the poorest of the poor because the rent set by the PWA exceeded the means of most needy poor. Mr. Jackson never thought of Aspendale as his permanent home, he always saw it as a point of departure for some other opportunity, which for him happened to be his post-secondary education.

Before I went away to college, my father had already begun to look for a place to buy. We just happened to move away, he had just already begun to look. It wasn’t a place to stay forever, but getting out would depend on what was available. You see where I am coming from? Uh, you know yes, I could say I am ready, but if there’s no place to be, then I stayed there until the opportunity comes. And if you were to look at the way people came and left that place, you will see that happen. They would move out of there to Chestnut St. to Ohio St, as another home would become available. That’s what you found there. It was a question of opportunity. It was, therefore, normal for residents to seek homes in the surrounding neighborhood. They would do so because of a desire to secure home ownership, but also because the housing commission saw to it that, if you could afford private market rate housing, you actively pursued that option. If your income exceeded a certain level, usually above five times the rent figures of the commission, you would be asked to start looking for alternative housing (LMHC, 1941, p. 5).

That was supposedly, now listen, I never paid a dollars rent, my father always took care of that. But I did come to understand that the rent was commensurate with your earnings, so that as your earnings went up, you would have to pay more for rent. And then at some point, you needed to be looking for housing outside of the projects. I believe there was a maximum … and if you were making that kind of money, then you ought to be buying a home. So I believe that was the principle.

Aspendale was not only an opportunity for Mr. Jackson, but also an active force in shaping his childhood education. It, as he readily admits, set him on the trajectory to attend college and lead a highly successful life (realizing that success means many things). In fact, he has organized reunions and presentations about the project to maintain the memory of those first pioneers and has given outsiders a glimpse at the success of the place. His groups of friends by and large are college graduates and successful professionals. Mr. Jackson believes Bluegrass-Aspendale not only played a passive role in their upbringing as a stable living environment, but actively encouraged education and moral development.

Reading Home

The voice of Bluegrass-Aspendale varies considerably, no two perspectives are quite alike. But as a collective entity, the project had an identity that was greater than the sum of its parts. Cooper’s (1971) famous dictum that “house is a symbol of self,” takes an appropriately modern, Jungian conception of representation. She posits that a house serves as a primary archetype for the individual (Cooper, 1971). Bluegrass-Aspendale, as a public housing project and an urban condition, represented more than individuality; it became a sign of a community. The homes in the project were not under complete control of their inhabitants, and were subject to processes of government, of capitalistic structures, and of social inequity. As Harvey states, “ideology and political hegemony in any society depends on an ability to control the material context of personal and social experience” (Harvey, 1990, p. 226). By seeing Bluegrass-Aspendale as a figurative place, people can control how they interpret it, with respect to their own positions. Former residents can see it as their childhood homes. Outsiders saw it as a dangerous urban ghetto. Administrators saw it as a challenging operational task. Academics wonder at its unique heritage and social commentary.

Through its life, residents found ways to create meaning in the face of this material control. For example, given that single mothers have occupied roughly two thirds of the units in the past 30 years, a group of women organized MOM in 1992 to support their constituency. They were responding to the patriarchal control of authorities over their bodies, families, and homes, forced to move depending on their marital status and
signifying, and producing themselves in the world, in the process wresting agency out of what might otherwise be a passive experience of being shunted from unit to unit by the state (Nast and Wilson, 1994, p. 53).

In reclaiming their territory, the women used a common agency to write their own story of home. Ironically, this collective spirit was comparable to the goals of public housing in the 1930s. By subsidizing housing for those unable to enter the market, the government (so often the target of our critical pens) was the active force in subverting unfair practices, particularly the exclusionary practices of Fordist industry. This benevolence deteriorated over time as those very same capitalistic structures consumed public housing. Ironically, those most cognizant of this economic force are the residents themselves.

With Bluegrass-Aspendale now reduced to dust, its capacity for making memories has turned into an ability to create flexible meanings. Simply put, the project will live on as a symbol, co-opted by non-residents and residents alike. The nature of that remembrance will be left to the circumstances of memory. As Douglas argues, "each kind of building (or home) has a distinctive capacity for memory or anticipation" (Douglas, 1991, p. 294). That anticipation, no longer able to rely upon bricks and mortar, will construct narratives of the past that selectively recall and forget; symbolize and order; and make and remake. The story of home will be told by a number of people and likely affect how we create public housing in the future.

The question to ask at this juncture in history is: what does memory do for us? In losing the place, society can finally determine its value without worrying about the nature of its present reality. Memory reveals latent and layered meanings that respond to the circumstances of today. Emily Dickinson states it more eloquently:

Perception of an object costs
Precise the Object’s loss —
Perception in itself a Gain,
Replying to its Price.

The Object Absolute — is nought —
Perception sets it fair
And then upbraids a Perfectness
That situates so far.

(Dickinson, 1955, 1071)

The stories of former residents represent these perceptions. The loss of the object results in the gain of a new symbol. Former residents have perhaps the most empowering ability of this entire saga, the ability to construct, away from external influence, their Home in Bluegrass-Aspendale. Freed from the intentionality of its maker, Bluegrass-Aspendale will gather the good and the bad through a continuous process of remembering and forgetting. With the material gone and the capital spent, their own imaginaries are free to build their Homes anew. These new constructions are rich with symbolism, “narrators are interested in projecting an image” (Portelli, 1991, p. 62). Even a complete forgetting, a complete displacement of Bluegrass-Aspendale from the community’s memory, will symbolize an important dimension of urban space.

Death
The Lexington Housing Authority wants very much to forget Bluegrass-Aspendale. Its memory connotes nothing more than the antiquated beliefs of housing authorities long ago. Today, they rely upon catchphrases to demonstrate how eagerly they wipe away the past, even though they utilize neo-historic architecture to supplant it. In a cruel irony of post-modernity, this force of redevelopment, “is continually reterritorializing with one hand what it is was deterritorializing with the other” (Harvey, 1990, p. 238). One such catchphrase, “transformation,” appears on the cover of one of their more recent annual reports, paired with images of machinery tearing down parts of the housing project. Framing the scene is a curving stonewall fence, comparable to hundreds of other such fences that would mark the entrance to common suburbs. In this sense, the Lexington Housing Authority has drawn upon the symbolic language of landscape to blend its efforts with typical suburban development.

The newest theme, “indistinguishable,” connotes the agency’s goal of wiping away the public’s stereotypical image of public housing. “Unpublic housing,” as Mr. Simms (Executive Director of the Lexington Housing Authority) so often calls this, negates the very factor that made Bluegrass-Aspendale so successful in its first 30 years. It relied upon community, both its own internal one and the larger municipal one, to support the goal of fair and equitable housing. The death of Bluegrass-Aspendale also brings about an end to collective idealism in considering how we might give everyone fair opportunities for housing. Instead of creatively addressing the social problems of housing shortages, today’s subsidized housing relies upon the symbolic language of an “upper” class to distort economic realities. As a result, social problems are sometimes glossed over in images of stonewalls or witty catchphrases. At what point is “transformation” substantive and not a mere façade?
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