

## Reading Tips and Study Questions: Planning as social reform—October 3<sup>rd</sup>

### Required reading:

1. *RPT*, **Jane Jacobs**, Introductory chapter from *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1961).
2. pp.121-171 only in **Lawrence J. Vale**, *Reclaiming Public Housing* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002). Note that the earlier part of this chapter (pp. 37-121) covers some of the material introduced on October 1 and can be skimmed for background detail and historical context.

### Tips and questions

In this session, we'll carry forward the public housing cases discussed on October 1 and consciously examine the broader questions they raise about the dilemmas in planning, both past and present. What happens to the ordered, rational city of "the experts" when public housing fails? What alternatives are there for "reclaiming" public housing? Who leads such efforts? What does this tell us about the roles of planners?

By the end of the 1970s, public housing projects in Boston (and nationally) had failed miserably—in both social and architectural terms. As in many cities, Boston's poor suffered from industrial job loss, out-migration of the middle class, and other changes. Meanwhile, the patronage-riven Boston Housing Authority (BHA), charged with managing 13,000 public housing apartments, had become a completely dysfunctional organization and was placed under court-ordered "receivership"—meaning that it was considered incapable of governing and operating itself—in 1980.

During the receivership, the BHA launched several ambitious redevelopment efforts, including those at West Broadway ("D Street") and Columbia Point (rebranded as "Harbor Point"). These reinventions of public housing embraced several classic challenges to modernist rational planning prefigured in Jane Jacobs' famous text. In contrast to the earlier top-down imposed modernist vision, the post-utopian reality of efforts to remake public housing became caught up

in neighborhood-specific struggles over race and poverty; debates over the strengths and limits of physical design as a redevelopment tool for promoting social welfare; and conflicts over the roles of expert versus local knowledge—i.e., the aims and expectations of both expert professionals and the resident communities that needed to work together to make redevelopment successful.

In the history of U.S. city planning, public housing can now be seen as a kind of double experiment. The first experiment (from the 1930s through the 1970s) entailed replacement of older “slum” areas by modernist housing blocs; the second experiment (begun in the 1980s and still underway) has replaced many public housing “slums” with more traditional-looking architecture and urbanism (including so-called “new urbanist” designs). In this context, Boston’s public housing transformations of the 1980s can be seen as harbingers of the national “HOPE VI” program, a \$5 billion initiative launched by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development in 1992. HOPE VI targets “severely distressed” public housing, and its planners and designers have imposed a new set of standards, both physical and social. In what ways do these new versions of public housing still draw on the social reform tradition of planning?

1. The utopian proposals of Howard, Wright, and Le Corbusier, as outlined by Robert Fishman—together with the sweeping critique of utopian modernism offered by **Jane Jacobs**—bracket key dilemmas in 20<sup>th</sup> century thought about planning. Two of these classic dilemmas concern: the roles of professional vs. indigenous knowledge; and the power and limits of physical design solutions vs. social policy or other strategies.
2. Considering the case of West Broadway discussed in **Vale**, in retrospect, given the array of socio-economic challenges facing families in public housing, does it make sense that the vast majority of Boston Housing Authority (BHA) redevelopment funding went toward intervention in the realm of design? Also, what kinds of practical knowledge (of the kind Jacobs celebrates) did public housing residents have that professional planners lacked? Conversely, what valuable technical knowledge did planners have that residents lacked but stood to benefit from?