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and  
BANFIELD

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POLITICS, PLANNING  
AND THE  
PUBLIC INTEREST

*The Case of  
Public Housing in Chicago*

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# PREFACE

*Housing is, in fact, one of the great universal tests in this difficult and dangerous postwar world: a test of ideals, ideas, skills, resources; of our democratic capacity for change and growth; of the effectiveness of both private enterprise and government and their ability to cooperate; of the intelligence of consumer and voter as well as producer and administrator. If we in America with all our resources cannot even solve our own housing problem, what hope is there?*

—National Public Housing Conference  
February 1948.

THIS IS A STUDY of how some important decisions were reached in a large American city. The city is Chicago and the decisions had to do mainly with the location of public housing projects. Through the analysis of this particular case we endeavor to bring empirical and theoretical materials together in a way which will further the development of the theory of decision-making and impart wider significance to the concrete data.

Chicago is the second largest city in the United States and the sixth largest in the world (there are 35 independent nations with smaller populations). From a practical standpoint, therefore, the workings of its government would be worth study even if there were no other municipal governments at all comparable. In fact, of course, many other governments resemble that of Chicago in some important respects.\*

The question of how much and what kind of public housing

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\* Indeed, Chicago combines many of what are usually considered the worst features of American municipal administration: it is only one of several autonomous taxing units having the same geographic base, its legal boundaries do not coincide even approximately with the metropolitan area, it is dominated by the state legislature, it has a weak mayor government, a long ballot, a great many small wards, a large number of virtually independent city departments and agencies, a planning commission with little power, and a political machine with much power.

a city should have and where it should be located is also of practical importance. Public housing is "big business" in the United States (roughly, there are 900 local authorities administering 400,000 units of housing in which 1,500,000 persons live) and slums are on the increase in all large cities. There is a strong possibility—particularly in the event of a major depression—that much more public housing will be built; many cities are facing, have faced or will face decisions very much like those that were made in Chicago.

The reader should be cautioned, however, against inferring that the political history of public housing in other cities has been identical with that of Chicago. Generally speaking, the interests which came in conflict in other cities were very much like those which came in conflict in Chicago. The rhetoric of the conflict was also generally very much the same. But there were nevertheless differences of great importance from city to city: for example, the question of whether Negroes were to be segregated in public housing projects was of great importance in San Francisco as it was in Chicago, but whereas in Chicago it was the Housing Authority which opposed segregation and the City Council which favored it (although not openly), in San Francisco it was the other way around. How far, then, can the facts of the Chicago case be taken as descriptive of the situation in other cities? The best answer to such a question is probably that the Chicago experiences should sensitize the reader to certain influences and relationships which are likely to be found, although not in exactly the same form, in most other cities. In short, acquaintance with what happened in Chicago may give the student of the public housing issue some indication of what to look for in other cities.

Furthermore, even though it does not parallel them exactly, the case of public housing in Chicago should be suggestive for certain classes of issues which do not involve housing. Decisions about site selection are likely to have a certain amount in common whether the facility is a public housing project, a sewage disposal plant, a tuberculosis sanitorium, a superhighway, or even a church or school. And since decisions regarding locations, along with decisions regarding budget amounts, are the form in which

city planning usually comes into political focus (a comprehensive plan as such is almost never the subject of serious political discussion or action), issues and problems like those described in this volume are the familiar concern of planners and politicians.

In addition, as the reader of the supplemental note will see, the logic of the planning process is essentially the same whether the planning be done by an agency like a housing authority which is concerned primarily with a single function and secondarily with other functions or by an agency like a city planning commission which is no more concerned with one function than with others.

Viewed in a still more restricted focus, i.e., as a measure for relieving the congestion of the inner city, the public housing site selection issue has further general significance. All measures for reducing congestion or for rebuilding central areas must move people to unbuilt areas which are most often on the outskirts of the city. This is everywhere likely to be fraught with political difficulties since a population equilibrium—and thus a political one—is altered; this is especially true if the people who are to move are of different class or ethnicity than those who already live in the outlying areas. Thus, any city which undertakes to “decant” its population is almost sure to encounter problems similar to (although of course not identical with) those encountered by public housing in Chicago.\* In the northern industrial cities of the United States where the inner congested slum areas are largely inhabited by Negroes, the parallel will probably be especially close.

Obviously we can not describe or “explain” all of the decisions pertinent to public housing in Chicago. Even if one omits decisions made by individual members of the electorate, thousands of people participated in this decision-making process and some of them have made thousands of decisions. Some of these decisions were of little or no consequence (e.g., a carpenter’s decision to drive a particular nail into a particular board).

We have used various criteria to decide which decisions to

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\* The English “New Towns,” for example, have met some difficulties very similar to those which were met in Chicago. See the account of Stevenage by Harold Orlans in *Utopia Ltd.*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1953.

examine and which to ignore. We focus on certain decisions made by the Chicago Housing Authority and on certain related decisions made in the local political structure (particularly the City Council, the Mayor, the Plan Commission and influential opinion-interest groups) and made by the Public Housing Administration and others in Washington. These selected decisions deal mainly with the kind of housing program aimed at under the terms of the general Housing Act of 1949, especially as related to location of projects and racial composition of occupancy, and to a small degree, architectural type.

Another set of criteria for the selection of relevant decisions derives from theory: we take account of decisions only if, and only insofar as, they have to do with "politics," "planning" or "the public interest," conceptions which are explained in a supplement which is the work of Banfield. The index to concepts which appears at the end of the book should help readers see the relations between the theoretical and empirical materials.

Some practical-minded readers may be disappointed that we have not ended the study with a list of specific "major recommendations for action." The reason is that our purpose has been both to describe how administrative and political decisions are made and to provide a framework of analysis which will enable the reader to see how better decisions might be made. In other words, we are not interested—except incidentally and mainly for illustrative purposes—in making specific recommendations having application to the Chicago scene (to do this would require much more time and far more facilities than we have possessed) but in developing a perspective for the analysis of decision-making processes in general.

We chose site selection in Chicago as the case to be studied partly because Meyerson was in charge of planning for the Chicago Housing Authority during the period with which we are most concerned. We expected that this circumstance would afford us a more intimate view of that decision-making process than we could obtain of any other; in some respects it did, but the very closeness of Meyerson's connection with the Authority was in some ways a handicap: we have been prevented by certain obligations from saying some things which an outsider would have

little difficulty in discovering and perhaps no hesitation in saying. The present study contains nothing, so far as we know, that an energetic investigator outside of the organization could not have learned from published materials, from public records and from interviews with the decision-makers themselves. All of them, we found, were quite willing to talk about the way decisions were reached.

What we have written illustrates the impossibility of achieving full relevance to immediate and practical issues while avoiding judgments which are not rigorously substantiated and which perforce often cannot be so substantiated. We have made extensive use of participant-observation and of interviews with leading actors. We have also relied heavily on documents—minutes, memoranda, speeches, newspaper files and so on—to supplement first-hand accounts. We have not been able to avoid the necessity of making judgments, however, and where it seemed necessary in order to achieve relevance, we have not hesitated to make conjectures or to record the conjectures of informants. While we have indicated conjectures by signal-words such as “perhaps,” “seems to be” and so forth, we have not always documented the source of the conjecture because to do so might violate someone’s privacy.

It should be kept in mind, that the events described here occurred several years ago and that the agencies mentioned may have changed considerably since.\* The reader perhaps also should be warned that our standard of good planning—rational decision-making—is an ideal one; the standard is, we think, useful for analysis, but real organizations (like real people), if the truth is told, do not make decisions in a substantially rational manner.

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\* Indeed, since this study went to press, Elizabeth Wood, the staff head of the Chicago Housing Authority and a main actor in our account, was replaced by Lieutenant General William B. Kean.



## Left High and Dry

