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A Brief Triumph for Progressive Housing Policy

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Reviews

A Brief Triumph for Progressive Housing Policy

Reviewed By Peter Dreier

Modern Housing for America: Policy Struggles in the New Deal Era by Gail Radford. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996. 273 pp.

Until the Depression, most American opinion leaders believed that the private market, with a helping hand from private philanthropy, could meet the nation's housing needs. Reformers who wanted government to play a major role in housing were a lonely voice in the political wilderness. In the first three decades of this century, a few unions and settlement house reformers built model housing developments for working class families, but without government subsidy. The nation's economic collapse provided reformers with a political opening to push their "radical" ideas that the federal government should subsidize "social housing" and help create a noncommercial sector free from profit and speculation. Like their European counterparts, they envisioned it for the middle-class as well as the poor.

Modern Housing for America: Policy Struggles in the New Deal Era by historian Gail Radford describes how these reformers mobilized people and ideas to gain allies and win a temporary victory within the early New Deal. These reformers – economists, planners, architects, social workers, and journalists – had faith in public enterprise and the positive role of architecture on people and communities. Their ideas and political activism inspired two progressive federal housing programs within the Public Works Administration, beginning in 1933. One program produced seven limited-dividend housing developments, several of them sponsored by labor unions. Radford provides a fascinating case study of one of these projects, the Carl Mackley Homes, built by the Hosiery Workers' Union in Philadelphia. Through a second program, the PWA itself built 51 housing developments (with over 21,000 units), one of which – the Harlem River Houses in New York – Radford describes in wonderful detail.

The reformers hoped to turn these prototype projects into a permanent government program. Led by Catherine Bauer and liberal unions (through the Labor Housing Conference, founded in 1934), they pushed for well-designed, mixed-income, noncommercial, government-subsidized housing projects, sponsored by unions, other non-profit organizations, and government agencies.

Radford resurrects Bauer, one of the unsung heroines of social reform, whose work as a journalist, planner, organizer, and political strategist finally gets the attention it deserves. Radford shows how Bauer held together the fragile liberal-labor coalition. She describes how Bauer translated her radical ideas into practical politics, but also how difficult it was for her to persuade her radical colleagues (like Lewis Mumford) to engage in pragmatic politics.

In the showdown over the magnitude and shape of public housing, the reformers were outmaneuvered by the real estate industry, led by the National Association of Real Estate Boards. The industry warned

about the specter of "socialism" and (with the enactment of the Wagner Public Housing Act in 1937) successfully lobbied to limit public housing to the poor and to give local governments discretion over whether and where to locate it. The two progressive programs were canceled. Since then, as Radford notes, the nation has had a dual housing system: huge tax breaks to promote the private development of single-family homes for the rich and the middle class, and stingy subsidies to help some of the poor (currently about one-quarter of all low-income households) live in government-assisted projects.

The reformers' failure to prevail has shaped federal housing policy ever since. To this day, only 1.3 million public housing units have been built. Moreover, with limited budgets, many projects were poorly constructed and/or badly designed – ugly warehouses for the poor – stigmatizing "government housing" as housing of last resort. Their siting contributes to the concentration of poverty in cities. The U.S. spends less on government housing subsidies for the poor than any other industrial country. Indeed, American politicians use widely-held (though often misleading) stereotypes about public housing to attack the very idea of government activism. For example, in a speech before the National Association of Realtors during his Presidential campaign, Bob Dole labeled public housing "one of the last bastions of socialism in the world" and said that local housing authorities have become "landlords of misery." The Clinton administration once floated a plan to essentially eliminate or privatize all public housing. The administration backed down, but HUD recently began to allow some local housing authorities to tear down troubled high-rise public housing developments (most of them built in the 1940s and 1950s) and replace them with scattered-site housing, with the consequence of reducing the overall number of subsidized units.

As Radford shows, this is not what Bauer and her visionary colleagues had in mind when they began to organize in the late 1920s to radically reform how our nation houses its people. Radford brilliantly reconstructs the political and policy struggles during this critical period. Although many others have written about the history of federal housing policy, Radford makes a number of important contributions.

Radford reminds us that the labor movement played a major role in mobilizing support for a progressive role for government in housing matters. Moreover, her case studies of labor-sponsored housing projects – for which she used archival materials as well as interviews with former and current residents – are fascinating. In telling this tale, Radford also reminds us that Bauer was only one of many women who played key leadership roles in the urban social reform movements of the Progressive era and the Depression.

The book also provides an engrossing look into the internal politics of the New Deal, especially the disputes between the radical and liberal wings of the Roosevelt government. Radford breathes life and drama into the bureaucratic maneuverings for control of housing policy. In one sense, Radford's book is about the "road not taken" in federal housing policy. But she also demonstrates how model housing developments sponsored by progressive organizations provided an alternative vision that, for a brief period, became institutionalized in government policy. Although these efforts failed to move from the margins to the mainstream, it is possible to imagine a different scenario. Radford shows that the outcome was not inevitable.

In addition to being a fascinating work of history, *Modern Housing for America* has relevance for today's urban reformers. Urban problems are not on the nation's mainstream agenda, and federal housing policy, in particular, is in limbo. Rebuilding a political coalition to address the plight of our cities won't be easy, especially since a majority of American voters now live in suburbs. Still, there is currently a renewal of progressive activism within the labor movement, the community organizing movement, and the Community Development Corporation (CDC) movement – contemporary counterparts to Bauer's coalition. To have a major influence on federal policy, however, they must develop a practical reform vision to galvanize the public's imagination and build a political coalition between cities and the

increasingly troubled inner-ring suburbs. Can reformers forge the appropriate alliances to gain a voice in our national debate, or will they bungle the opportunity with factionalism, moral grandstanding, and political naivete? The work of Catherine Bauer and her colleagues offers many lessons for those who wish to make our cities more humane and livable places.

Radford has uncovered experiences from the past that can provide political lessons in the present. All housing activists, policy practitioners, and scholars concerned about urban problems and policy should read this well-written and provocative book.

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