

**PLANNING FOR
PUBLIC HOUSING**

**Under the Public Policy
of New York City and State**

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The City of New York



COMMISSION ON INTERGROUP RELATIONS

The following is a reprint of an address by Dr. Frank S. Horne, Executive Director of the City of New York Commission on Intergroup Relations, delivered to the Womens' City Club of New York, December 5, 1956.

YOU WILL see that I have taken the liberty of adding a subtitle to the subject of this discussion. Thus I would seek to emphasize the fact that here we are not simply planning for housing in the way that just any community might be doing—but rather we are planning for an Open City; we are planning under the distinctive public policy of the City and State of New York.

The Sharkey-Brown-Isaacs Law declared that discrimination or segregation in housing contravenes public policy. Recently, in reaffirmation of this policy, Mayor Wagner said:

The objective of this city's policy is clearly that every resource and facility of the city and its departments be utilized in every possible way to remove from the housing supply any restrictions based upon race, religion or national origin. As a matter of morality as well as law all New Yorkers must have the right to bargain for their shelter in a freely open, competitive housing market.

As our city departments apply the policies and practices I have outlined to achieve the public policy reaffirmed herein, we shall not find it necessary to deprive any neighborhood of the opportunity for redevelopment . . . We ask the continued cooperation of governmental agencies and private organizations to help us accept the higher challenge of a free, open, integrated city. Our appeal is for the fundamental property rights of all individuals, the sanctity of law and the highest morality of man's relation to man.

Certainly, it is somewhat ironic that the challenge of the "Open City" policy now finds us confronted with so many grave problems involving the public housing program. Ironic because for so many years this program in New York City won national recognition as a "model" for the demonstration of racial integration. It was used as the "control" for a distinctive study which indicated that the experience of various ethnic groups living in public housing communities as neighbors enhanced good intergroup relations. As the trend toward

open occupancy has moved forward throughout the Nation, New York's pioneering experience has been a source of inspiration, on the one hand, and a guide to feasible techniques and methods, on the other hand.

The very fact that New York's public housing program has been so uniquely pointed up in the national scene as a successful example of sound integration makes all the more alarming the apparent reversals suffered during the past few years.

It follows that we must be gravely concerned about the root causes for this reversal. We must analyze these causes—not in the spirit of criticism or recrimination, but rather in the spirit of working out together solutions to a problem that affects the integrity of our whole city.

In this spirit, we may examine some of the most obvious danger signals and consider approaches through which we may get at the fundamental issues.

Danger signal number one is the steady increase in the proportion of occupancy by non-white minority and ethnic groups in public housing. Program-wise, this proportion has now crossed the fifty-percent mark. Project-wise, there are over 30 developments in which occupancy by Negro, Puerto Rican, and Chinese tenants is in excess of sixty-percent of the total occupancy. Of these, ten are so preponderantly occupied by non-white minorities that we cannot escape identifying them as veritable racial ghettos.

In contrast to practically all of the large cities with extensive public housing and clearance programs, the sheer weight of an overbalanced proportion of minorities in the housing market or in the relocation load, though a significant factor, does not seem to be overpowering. We may reasonably estimate—on basis of unfortunately limited information—that only one-fourth of the families occupying substandard rental units are non-white.¹ Moreover, non-white families are estimated to constitute about 40% of the relocation load for Title I developments.

While I do not mean to minimize the volume of housing need and pressure for housing among minorities in New York City, it is evident that this is but part of the whole story.

1. U.S. Bureau of Census, Family Income and Rent Survey, special tabulation for New York City, shows that in 1954, non-whites constituted about 25% of the total primary families living in renter dwelling units that were classified as renter-occupied substandard units in 1950.

Danger signal number two is the high proportion of white families that move out of public housing projects in sharp contrast to the low proportion that move in.

To the extent that this trend involves families that are eligible for admission and continued occupancy in the projects, it is highly significant and has far-reaching implications in terms of apparent discriminatory conditions even in the low-rental private supply. It seems as though low-income white families clearly have a choice between low-rental dwellings in the private supply and public housing that non-white families do not enjoy.

The degree to which minorities suffer a disadvantage in competing for this sector of the private supply is indicated in the special census data to which I previously referred. These data show a complete reversal in the proportions of white and non-white families as distributed throughout the monthly contract rent ranges. In the rental categories under \$35.00 we find 58 percent of the non-white families.

Thus it is evident that discrimination in the low-rental supply of private housing is one of the contributors to the trend toward segregation in public housing. Soon we may all realize that we cannot achieve democratic living patterns in a city half-open and half-shut. Our public policy must embrace the total supply or it will not effectively embrace any part of it.

Danger signal number three may be found in the questions increasingly raised about the desirability of public housing projects; their appeal as places in which families find it satisfying to live; their function in enriching the social experiences and in stimulating the growth and development of families who live in them; their role as a dynamic force and influence in the communities of which they are a part.

This is truly a serious point of concern in terms of public housing's potential role in the creation of an "Open City."

These three danger signals alone should serve to alert us to the urgent need for definitive action—for definite change. All of us involved, directly or indirectly, in influencing the character of public

housing in our community are confronted with the urgency of facing up to the reality and the demands of the problems with which we are confronted.

At this stage, we must plan in two directions. We must set about the difficult task of planning to re-establish and maintain democratic occupancy patterns in the existing public housing program; to arrest and reverse the menacing trend toward ghettoization of the 85,000 dwellings now municipally owned and controlled. At the same time, we must see to it that future public housing is soundly embraced as an integral and vital part of the total city planning that is consonant with the "Open City" policy of New York.

It is my belief that several steps are now essential to this charge.

The public housing program might well consider the feasibility of sharing the burden of its problems and efforts to solve them with the community through an approach similar to that adopted by the public school system.

Either this or some other suitable approach should be used so that a sound, community-oriented planning process might be instituted along the following lines:

A. Analysis of the underlying causes of the trend toward minority concentration in public housing including:

1. Factors affecting desirability of public housing projects.
2. Public housing rentals and rent fixing methods in comparison with private supply.
3. Factors affecting stability of occupancy.
4. Tenant-management relations.
5. Tenant organization and community activities.
6. Tenant attitudes.
7. Causes and characteristics of turn-over.
8. Impact of relocation upon project tenancy.
9. Project location.
10. Tenant recruitment, selection, and placement practices.

B. Determination of methods to alter or modify conditions contributing to minority concentration trends.

C. Planning to put these methods into practice with the full understanding and cooperation of the community.

Obviously these items are merely suggestive.

Because of my grave concern about the existing program and the necessity of focusing attention upon measures which might contribute to solving the problems already eroding these developments, I have foregone reference to the issue of site selection. Certainly this is one of the principal keys to our future planning—not only for public housing alone but for our whole concept of a renewed city.

For all of our planning to achieve the objectives of an "Open City"—whether it be for site selection, management, or any other aspect of housing, it is essential that we establish a framework of guiding principles. These I would propose as follows:

1. Recognition of a transitional de-segregation stage in which *deliberate* measures are adopted to alter existing patterns. This does not mean that existing ghettos can be eradicated immediately. But it does mean that positive and firm steps must be taken to reduce overcrowding and congestion in ghetto areas, prevent their expansion into fringe areas, and halt new ghetto formation.

The responsibility of publicly-assisted housing in this tremendous undertaking, under the public policy of our City, is clear.

2. "In this transitional stage, public and publicly-assisted housing should be located only in areas where it is feasible for management, using sound and acceptable techniques, to achieve a tenant body in which racial and ethnic groups reasonably reflect the total market for such housing."

This principle is directly quoted from those recommended by the New York State Committee on Discrimination in Housing, June 21, 1956.

3. The objective of desegregation and integration—the creation of an "Open City" must be accorded highest priority over other goals

until the trend toward patterns of minority concentration are substantially modified.

4. All available resources of the community must be involved in responsibility for the specific actions that are essential to eliminating the evils of the past and establishing new patterns for the future.

Once we accept these fundamental principles; once we resolve that the objective of an Open City must be attained, we can work and plan effectively for solution of the many problems we know will beset us.

We believe that the desires and intentions of the citizens of the City of New York are reflected in the public policy established under its laws and articulated by its official spokesmen. We believe that this citizenry will support and respond to leadership that seeks attainment of our public policy objectives.

If the tools are now inadequate—legislatively or otherwise—they must be recast. Immediately, two changes appear to be necessary.

First, the non-discrimination laws affecting publicly-assisted housing should be re-examined to determine whether or not they are suited to the demands of positive administrative measures to guard against racial segregation; for whether *de facto* or not, this is the prime evil of discrimination, and is so recognized by the United States Supreme Court.

Secondly, we know now that the publicly-assisted housing and re-development programs cannot carry the entire burden of achieving an "Open City." The time has come for an all-out drive for Fair Housing Practices legislation. Artificial racial barriers must not be permitted to stand anywhere in the City of New York.²

As New York City has set the Nation's pace toward civil rights in the past; so it will continue in the future. There is no other answer—nor will there ever be—for the first city of the world.

2. In December, 1957 the City of New York enacted the Sharkey-Brown-Isaacs law, prohibiting discrimination in all private multiple dwellings and in one or two-family homes which are built in developments of 10 or more houses.