

AUSTIN'S PUBLIC HOUSING: FROM ASSIMILATIONIST PROJECTS  
TO THEATERS OF BLACK STRUGGLE IN TEXAS, 1937–2017

by

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## **DEDICATION**

*For Mom and Dad*

*Thank you for your everlasting love, support, and encouragement.*

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# 1. SITUATING AUSTIN’S PUBLIC HOUSING

## IN A NATIONAL CONTEXT, 1930S TO THE PRESENT

### I. Introduction

In April 2017, the City of Austin’s Task Force on Institutional Racism and Systemic Inequities published its final report outlining patterns of inequality in the Austin, Texas, region. Austin Mayor Steve Adler formed the task force in November 2016, seeking to measure the city’s challenges and identify solutions to eradicate discriminatory practices in five areas. The City of Austin set out to bring greater equity in criminal and civil justice; education; health; finance, banking, and industry; and housing and real estate. The report reiterated what many Black and Latino Austinites already knew: the city was built on “institutional racism and systemic inequalities.”<sup>1</sup> In terms of housing, the report highlighted Austin’s dark history of racially discriminatory practices and the harmful consequences that have stemmed from urban growth and gentrification, including rising costs of living and the near absence of affordable housing. The Task Force offered a number of suggestions to foster equality in a city ranked as one of the most economically and racially segregated metropolitan regions in the nation. Most significantly, the Task Force called on the City of Austin to guarantee that “people of color who have long lived” in certain areas “have a right to stay and enjoy living in economically and racially integrated (or inclusive) neighborhoods.”<sup>2</sup> In urging the City of Austin to respect these people’s communities, the Task Force pushed Austin to end its

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<sup>1</sup> Mayor’s Task Force on Institutional Racism and Systemic Inequities, *Final Report* (Austin: City of Austin, 2017), 1.

<sup>2</sup> Mayor’s Task Force, *Final Report*, 17, 24.

longstanding practice of displacing and discriminating against its African-American and Mexican-American populations in the name of the City's developmental interests.

Despite the City of Austin's efforts to study and propose solutions for its housing inequality, residents of Rosewood Courts face ongoing challenges in ensuring their right to stay in the East Austin complex. In 2012, the Housing Authority of the City of Austin (HACA) initiated a plan to demolish and rebuild Rosewood Courts, the country's first Black public housing project funded by the United States Housing Authority (USHA). Citing the complex's substantial deterioration, HACA declared that demolition was the only way the City of Austin could serve those living in housing that had been in use for nearly eight decades. HACA's plan elicited concern from Rosewood Courts' residents, preservationists, and Austin City Council over both the temporary (and most likely, permanent) displacement of Rosewood's tenants and the fate of the historically significant complex. Significantly, the dispute over the Courts' future has raised fundamental questions over the origins, historical development, and future of public housing in Austin.

As residents and officials debate the future of the historic Rosewood Courts, its pioneering role in Austin's public housing and the nation's federal public housing program has become only more important. This thesis examines the history of Austin's public housing and the trajectory of local housing operations in the context of public housing's national development and reputation. Specifically, I focus on the experience of African-American Austinites living in segregated public housing and now facing displacement from their homes. In the late 1930s, HACA built three public housing complexes for the city's Black, Latino, and white families in an assimilationist effort

dedicated to instilling the city's working poor with middle-class values while adhering to the period's racial politics. Initially, Black and Latino residents embraced life in these modern projects that replaced East Austin's blighted slums. Within a few decades, however, Austin's public housing, subject to the city government's and HACA's racist policies, deteriorated to a derelict state. Black public housing residents, especially those at Booker T. Washington Terrace, strove to better their living conditions and hold the housing authority accountable for its longstanding neglect and discrimination. Rosewood Courts' current residents have likewise fought back against the housing authority's practices in an attempt to better their own living situations as well as those of future public housing residents. Today, HACA officials point to Rosewood Courts' dilapidated physical condition, arguing for a dramatic reinvention of public housing in the city. The evidence suggests, however, that the housing authority's intentions are not based on concern for tenant welfare alone. In targeting Rosewood Courts for demolition, HACA joins in an ongoing national drive to undo public housing. Such a plan raises alarm for many observers in a city where low-income residents need housing assistance more than ever. The plans for demolition ignored the value the project has long held for residents, the significance of the Courts for current housing problems, the threat of repeating the displacement of Black communities, and thus the historic character of housing that deserves to be preserved.

The case for the preservation of Rosewood Courts is grounded in both its long-term history and the discrimination and gentrification in the city's recent past. The history of the Courts—like the history of public housing generally—is central to Black social and political history in East Austin and the United States. In recent decades, rapid

development in Austin has erased the key places in Austin's rich African-American history. Though city officials have just begun recognizing the destruction that has been ensuing, the pressure for development continues and now threatens to wipe away Rosewood Courts, as it has leveled much of historic East Austin. The history of Austin's public housing, as recovered here, suggests that the fight over Rosewood Courts is yet another chapter in the Black Austinites' long battles to carve out decent places to live and to preserve their history in a city with a deeply troubled history of embattled public housing and racial inequality.

The story of Austin's public housing must be framed in terms of contemporary perspectives concerning the national program and its evolution. Scholars of America's public housing program have commonly labeled the system as a federal initiative doomed from its inception, despite numerous policy interventions and half-hearted attempts at programmatic restructuring. This declension model of public housing has taken shape through many case studies of shifting policies toward changing populations, emphasizing the importance of slum clearance and housing construction on the social and economic prospects for Black communities in American cities. Most observers hold that public housing, since its beginning, has functioned as a state mechanism for grouping America's poorest citizens into specially designated communities.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> For examples of this viewpoint, see John F. Bauman, "Public Housing: The Dreadful Saga of a Durable Policy," *Journal of Planning Literature*, 8, no. 4 (1994): 347–61, as cited in Lawrence J. Vale, *Purging the Poorest: Public Housing the Design Politics of Twice-Cleared Communities* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013); Arnold R. Hirsch, *Making the Second Ghetto: Race and Housing in Chicago, 1940–1960* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998); Howard Husock, *America's Trillion-Dollar Mistake: The Failure of American Housing Policy* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2003); Lee Rainwater, *Behind Ghetto Walls: Black Family Life in a Federal Slum* (Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company, 1970).

Historian Lawrence Vale rejects the declension view of public housing as a monolithic government strategy of “concentration of poverty,” instead defining public housing as part of a larger “cyclical practice of displacement and neighborhood renewal.”<sup>4</sup> Vale identifies a “triple social experiment,” in which two time periods, both geared towards housing the deserving working class, bookended a thirty-year “interregnum,” wherein housing policy pushed America’s poorest into problematic public housing.<sup>5</sup> I use Vale’s three-period organization to provide a general historical overview of American public housing’s development and evaluate existing scholarship regarding the federal program’s purpose, operation, and success. As applied to Austin’s public housing, Vale’s framework allows for an understanding of the ways HACA’s projects shifted from initially assimilationist complexes to theaters of black struggle during public housing’s most notorious period and highlights the housing authority’s current emphasis on mixed-income facilities as the ideal housing for its low-income residents.



Figure 1: Newly-constructed Rosewood Courts, circa 1939. Courtesy 38053, Austin History Center, Austin Public Library.

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<sup>4</sup> Vale, *Purging the Poorest*, 3.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 6, 3.

## II. Phase One: Assimilationist Projects

The government's first real foray into public housing aimed to create segregated assimilationist complexes for the working class. This first phase, driven by the era's "strong penchant for homeownership," began in the early 1930s and lasted through the 1950s.<sup>6</sup> The United States Congress created Public Works Administration's Housing Division (PWA) in the National Industrial Recovery Act in 1933, formalizing public housing and slum clearance as a federal strategy to help the poor. Though President Herbert Hoover had initiated a low-cost housing program with the Emergency Relief and Construction Act of 1932, Hoover's program failed to accomplish anything notable before President Franklin D. Roosevelt's inauguration in 1933.<sup>7</sup> PWA Director Harold Ickes, who also served as Roosevelt's Secretary of the Interior, steered the Housing Division's embrace of slum clearance as social and economic engineering. To Ickes and other policy-makers, slums hemorrhaged cities' finances by failing to provide returns on investment. Vale and other scholars have shown that politicians and reformers claimed slum clearance would provide a model solution for blighted urban areas. In defense of massive clearance of slum housing, civic leaders argued that modern public housing would create exemplary clean neighborhoods that would foster industrious workers and good citizens. Of course, public housing served the self-interest of reformers and city leaders because the projects highlighted their commitments to community improvement in a way that seemed to offer something to everyone.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Kenneth T. Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 7.

<sup>7</sup> Robert B. Fairbanks, *The War on Slums in the Southwest* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2014), 28.

<sup>8</sup> Vale, *Purging the Poorest*, 9.

After Congress passed the Housing Act of 1937 (also referred to as the Wagner-Steagall Act), the newly-formed USHA undertook the challenge of implementing effective public housing across the nation.<sup>9</sup> Like the PWA, the USHA promoted slum clearance as the prime method for elevating entire neighborhoods, replacing substandard housing units with new, clean housing suitable for upstanding members of the working class. By funding local housing authorities' operations, the USHA supported the creation of new low-cost housing as a way to reward the "potential middle class"—those who were monetarily poor but otherwise model citizens espousing middle-class "values or aspirations."<sup>10</sup> Local housing authorities, such as HACA, seized slum clearance as a way to eradicate the city's blighted areas and rescue the deserving poor from impoverished conditions. However, residents displaced from the cleared slums rarely found a spot in the new USHA-funded complexes because they could not meet strict eligibility standards imposed by local housing authorities.<sup>11</sup> Local housing officials used eligibility standards to encourage working-class tenants' assimilation of certain middle-class ideals, such as patriotism, thrift, and the nuclear family, that infused American society during this period.<sup>12</sup> At the same time, the projects made the government an active partner in the long history of displacement and inequality in U.S. cities.

Reformers sought to use the design of public housing to influence inhabitants' good behavior. Marta Gutman explores the humanitarian influences of reform-minded

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<sup>9</sup> The USHA was later reorganized under the Housing and Home Finance Agency (HHFA) and again under the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD).

<sup>10</sup> Lawrence Friedman, *Government and Slum Housing: A Century of Frustration* (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1968), 131, as quoted in Vale, *Purging the Poorest*, 12.

<sup>11</sup> Vale, *Purging the Poorest*, 7.

<sup>12</sup> Winifred D. Wandersee, *Women's Work and Family Values, 1920–1940* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), 1–2.

public design in *A City for Children*. Focusing on welfare agencies, orphanages, children’s charities, and women’s philanthropic societies in Progressive-era Oakland, California, Gutman shows how these organizations created a “charitable landscape” in the city.<sup>13</sup> Such agencies planned their buildings’ aesthetic and functional design to embody certain values, particularly the newfound cultural importance of nurturing childhood. Gutman demonstrates how “physical spaces offer a unique and useful tool” to understand expressions of past social, political, economic, and cultural ideals.<sup>14</sup> As such, her work provides a model for understanding how Austin’s public housing reflected reformers’ values and aspirations in the 1930s and beyond.

By the mid-twentieth century, U.S. housing architecture stressed the social and political significance of domestic dwellings. Kenneth T. Jackson’s classic work, *Crabgrass Frontier* (1985), showed that, beginning in the 1930s, Americans began subscribing to a national emphasis on quality housing, ideally owner-occupied single-family homes in suburban communities, as embodying coveted middle-class values. As Jackson illustrates, the growth of American suburbs fostered this concern for single-family housing in ways that depended upon the creation and maintenance of racially segregated communities. Though the single-family home and its yard represented independence and escape from crowded urban slums, individuals and organizations use various forms of exclusionary violence and legal tools to make suburban homeownership difficult for Black Americans. At the same time, public housing—which had its roots in serving Americans of all racial groups—began to be connected with slum clearance in

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<sup>13</sup> Marta Gutman, *A City for Children: Women, Architecture, and the Charitable Landscape of Oakland, 1850–1950* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2014), 25.

<sup>14</sup> Gutman, *A City for Children*, 29.

Black neighborhoods. Jackson highlights the ways that local housing authorities strengthened existing patterns of racial segregation, a fact that was as true in Austin as it was anywhere in the nation.<sup>15</sup> Though Jackson does not address the ideals that infused reformers' assimilationist hopes for public housing and its architecture, he shows how public housing came to be associated with a process of social development separate from individualistic suburban housing, and thus that public housing grew in opposition to the "norm" in the postwar era.

Austin's early embrace of public housing and its rehabilitative qualities mirrored a larger trend in municipal areas throughout the Southwest. In *The War on Slums in the Southwest*, Robert A. Fairbanks studies five Southwestern cities to demonstrate how the area's regional experience reflects that of the nation, consequently widening our understanding of America's affordable housing policies. His analysis of this understudied region reveals that Texas cities' forays into public housing focused on the same concerns as those in other areas of the country, including attitudes about race and segregation.<sup>16</sup> Fairbanks's work offers an important regional perspective for studying public housing in Texas, yet he overlooks Austin's significant role.<sup>17</sup> Austin's Santa Rita Courts, reserved for Mexican-American families, was the nation's first completed USHA-financed project, while Rosewood Courts also earned historic status as the country's first Black project built with USHA funding. This history can fruitfully build on the insights Fairbanks has found in his study of Dallas, Houston, and San Antonio.

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<sup>15</sup> Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, 72, 133, 225.

<sup>16</sup> Fairbanks, *The War on Slums in the Southwest*, 1–3, 72.

<sup>17</sup> Austin joined New Orleans and New York City as the first three cities to receive loans from the USHA. Citing alphabetical order, Congressman Johnson arranged for Austin's selection to be announced first, thereby making it the "first" city in the United States to receive USHA-funding for public housing construction.

As Jackson and Fairbanks have shown, race and segregation shaped public housing from the outset. In complying with the period's laws regarding race and separate accommodations, the USHA and its local government subsidiaries ensured that new public housing complexes were racially-designated. Yet some scholars have gone beyond naming cities and local housing authorities as the sole prime actors in creating segregated complexes. For example, Preston H. Smith II considers Black Chicagoans' roles in designating the creation, implementation, and efficacy of public housing in Chicago. In *Racial Democracy and the Black Metropolis*, Smith argues that influential Black elites exploited their power and connections with local and national government officials to direct Chicago's housing policy in the mid-twentieth century. Smith claims that these African-American leaders approached housing reform through a racial democratic lens and with their own political needs in mind, effectively legitimizing "housing stratification" by class among Black citizens.<sup>18</sup> In fighting against racially-informed real estate policies and pursuing policies that "represented [their] assumed singular position of race," Black elites unsuccessfully combatted "the political-economic foundations of residential segregation."<sup>19</sup> This failure to address economic disparity adversely affected lower-income Black working-class residents' access to decent housing. While Smith largely excludes the voices of the affected working-class and low-income individuals, he expands the circle of responsible actors beyond white reformers and local, state, and federal government officials and illustrates how African Americans, of a particular socioeconomic class, played a part in shaping housing policies in the United States.

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<sup>18</sup> Preston H. Smith II, *Racial Democracy and the Black Metropolis: Housing Policy in Postwar Chicago* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota, 2012), xii.

<sup>19</sup> Smith, *Racial Democracy and the Black Metropolis*, 301, xii.

During the first phase of public housing in Austin, HACA built its three earliest public housing projects—Rosewood Courts, Santa Rita Courts, and Chalmers Courts. All fully inhabited by 1940, these complexes and their low-income African-American, Mexican-American, and white occupants represented a new era of government assistance. As Chapter Two shows, the federal government promoted slum clearance and assisted America’s working-class in accessing suburban-style homes of their own. Beyond detailing HACA’s creation and the construction of its first segregated projects, I highlight the major figures and social philosophy that both supported and protested public housing’s implementation. The period’s cultural values regarding family, domesticity, and homeownership informed these public housing complexes’ designs, which complemented HACA’s goals in rehabilitating its low-income tenants and encouraging their economic and social aspirations. With this chapter, I argue that the City of Austin and its housing authority used these projects to assimilate their Black, Latino, and poor white occupants into paradigms of the wholesome, nuclear American family unit. At the same time, HACA maintained existing segregation patterns as determined by the City of Austin’s racist urban planning scheme. Understanding the original intent and purposes behind Austin’s incipient program is crucial for comprehending public housing’s drastic transformation in both local and national contexts and grasping just how far HACA strayed from its original mission.

### III. Phase Two: Public Housing as a Theater of Struggle during an Era of Decline

Public housing’s second experimental phase, situated during the 1960s and 1980s, represents a distinct interval between two “assimilationist” eras.<sup>20</sup> This period saw the

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<sup>20</sup> Vale, *Purging the Poorest*, 17.

complete conversion of public housing into welfare housing. Consequently, the projects' slum-like atmospheres facilitated the rise of public housing as theaters of struggle. With the postwar housing boom and private home construction in full swing, policymakers sought to ensure that public housing did not compete with the private market. Officials responded by narrowing the program's "target audience" and fostering "an expectation that public housing should be less expensive than private housing."<sup>21</sup> As private homes became more affordable, public housing's original intended tenants, the white working class, more and more left to seek middle-class status in suburban homes of their own. Income caps and other legislative measures further limited the pool of applicable tenants and lowered their income requirements, thereby solidifying public housing's "transformation to welfare status" and primarily non-white lodging.<sup>22</sup>

Historian D. Bradford Hunt blames public housing's decline directly on policymakers and housing administrators who based their decisions on market ideology and ignored tenants' perspectives. Hunt's book, *Blueprint for a Disaster*, uses Chicago's public housing saga to illustrate how housing policies failed to respond to changing housing needs. While other historians generally regard public housing as an ideologically admirable program that was unfortunately exploited by local politicians to perpetuate segregation, Hunt stands out by contending that public housing's failure primarily stems from systemic policy breakdowns rather than racist intentions.<sup>23</sup> In the postwar period, he argues, officials, under pressure to rebuild homes for those displaced by slum clearance, emphasized cost-effective construction. Such measures resulted in the creation of high

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<sup>21</sup> D. Bradford Hunt, *Blueprint for Disaster: The Unraveling of Chicago Public Housing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 289.

<sup>22</sup> Hunt, *Blueprint for Disaster*, 211.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 7, 13.

rises, widely regarded as public housing's ultimate downfall. Hunt suggests that local and federal officials' "bureaucratic anxieties and cost concerns" led them to approve the construction of these massive, now-infamous "second-class housing" developments, where poor architectural design ultimately invited a number of social problems, including crime, gang activity, and juvenile delinquency.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, the 1969 Brooke Amendment to the 1968 Fair Housing Act capped public housing rent to thirty percent of tenants' income, which forcibly drove higher-earning working class tenants away and concentrated the poorest in public housing.<sup>25</sup> The Brooke Amendment's stipulations effectively coerced agencies to rely on federal subsidies to cover operating costs.<sup>26</sup> With this new policy, public housing became the last-ditch resort for the nation's poorest citizens. Tenants' income-based rents could not provide enough funds to offset projects' maintenance expenses and invest in good management, thus kicking off a "tailspin" into deteriorating and dangerous buildings.<sup>27</sup>

As more and more Americans became aware of the concentration of poverty in public housing, some government officials and activists pushed for overhauling policies. For example, the Civil Rights movement and responsive legislation, such as President Kennedy's Executive Order 11603 and the Fair Housing Act of 1968, made it harder for housing authorities to enforce segregation in their complexes. Furthermore, civil rights activists criticized tenant screening procedures that had routinely discriminated against single-parent families or those who relied primarily on welfare for their income.

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<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 123, 141.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 186.

<sup>26</sup> J.A. Stoloff, "A Brief History of Public Housing," paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Sociological Association (San Francisco, CA, August 14, 2004), 11.

<sup>27</sup> Hunt, *Blueprint for a Disaster*, 186.

Consequently, policymakers began to explore new approaches to public housing, which would later become formalized during the program's third phase. The 1974 Housing and Community Development Act represents one such example. This law established Section 8 Existing Housing, which provided tenants with "portable housing certificates" that were meant to help off-set their rents in private housing.<sup>28</sup> Despite these legal and political interventions, public housing's second period, which saw its decades-long conversion from housing intended for the upstanding working class to compounds for the often-despised poor, symbolized the "death of public housing from the perspective of the program's authors."<sup>29</sup> Historians, too, have had difficulty in seeing beyond this decline in public housing.

Much like in Chicago and elsewhere across the nation, Austin concentrated its low-income housing in Black neighborhoods and subjected its tenants to racist and classist policies, creating struggle in public housing. In particular, African-American occupants living in Austin's second Black public housing project, Booker T. Washington Terrace, accused city officials and municipal services of purposefully ignoring their plight. As I will demonstrate in Chapter Three, the experiences of Black inhabitants in Austin's public housing during the 1960s and 1970s reflect national trends seen in public housing. While Booker T. Washington Terrace was built with the same optimism that informed HACA's earlier constructions, HACA willfully ignored the complex's dire environment and failed to create decent and safe housing reminiscent of its earlier operations. Though Austin's non-white housing units were not high-rises like many other complexes built during this period, they were nonetheless subject to the same forces of

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<sup>28</sup> Vale, *Purging the Poorest*, 17–18, 20.

<sup>29</sup> Hunt, *Blueprint for a Disaster*, 211.

racism, discrimination, and unsafe living conditions experienced by African-American public housing residents across the country at this time. Booker T. Washington Terrace's embattled residents, who very much felt the impacts of racism and discrimination in the city at large, combatted these forces in their quest to make their complex safer and prevent the perpetuation of segregated public housing in Austin. The experiences of these residents contrast with HACA's original mission and reflect greater tension with social, racial, and economic inequality that defined the era, despite significant progress in the civil rights arena.

#### IV. Phase Three: Seeking a New Beginning in Low-Income Housing as an Engine of Economic Development

Phase three, which began in the 1990s, saw the government's overhaul of the public housing programs in an attempt to fix the problems public housing faced during its second phase. Led by Secretary Henry Cisneros, the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) pushed its HOPE VI program as a method to redevelop distressed urban areas.<sup>30</sup> The new program directly responded to the U.S. Congress's National Commission on Severely Distressed Public Housing, which published its findings in 1992. The commission's report called for a physical revamping of public housing and urged housing authorities to more actively assist residents in accessing better economic opportunities and social services.<sup>31</sup> HOPE VI sought to redesign the concept of public housing by demolishing dilapidated complexes and replacing them with mixed-income communities, often funded by private-public partnerships. Much like the USHA's

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<sup>30</sup> HOPE stands for "Housing Opportunities for People Everywhere."

<sup>31</sup> Margery Austin Turner, Susan J. Popkin, and Lynette Rawlings, *Public Housing and the Legacy of Segregation* (Washington, D.C.: Urban Institute Press, 2009), 6.

guiding philosophy, HUD hoped that more attractive housing populated by people of various socioeconomic backgrounds would motivate low-income residents to aspire to greater economic and social status, revive public housing, and rescue its operations from its slum-like status of the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>32</sup> The third period also saw the expansion of HUD's voucher program, now known as the Housing Choice Vouchers. By encouraging low-income recipients to "rent in the private market," the program serves as one strategy aimed at dismantling the concentrated pockets of poor public housing inhabitants that grew during public housing's second phase.<sup>33</sup>

HOPE VI and its new approach continue to shape public housing's construction and function, namely through its successor, the Choice Neighborhoods program. However, critics such as scholar Edward G. Goetz have blasted HOPE VI's failure to live up to its stated goals. In *New Deal Ruins*, Goetz argues that HUD's mixed-income strategy seeks to "dismantle" the public housing program, primarily by promoting a "discourse of disaster" that inaccurately labels the program as a conclusive national failure.<sup>34</sup> Goetz acknowledges that current tenant screening procedures and standards resemble those from public housing's first phase, but he argues that housing authorities' understandings of their own roles have fundamentally changed. According to Goetz, many housing authorities "shed the image of social service agencies" and instead became "dynamic real estate developers" whose pursuit of mixed-income developments accelerated the gentrification of low-income neighborhoods (the typical locations of

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<sup>32</sup> Vale, *Purging the Poorest*, 23.

<sup>33</sup> Turner, Popkin, and Rawlings, *Public Housing and the Legacy of Segregation*, 2.

<sup>34</sup> Edward G. Goetz, *New Deal Ruins: Race, Economic Justice, and Public Housing Policy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013), 2.

public housing projects) and thus unaffordability to those who live there.<sup>35</sup> We see this phenomenon in Austin, as HACA seeks to capitalize on the city's healthy real estate market with a new, mixed-income Rosewood Courts funded by the Choice Neighborhoods program.

As Goetz and other scholars claim, surveys show that the majority of tenants affected by HOPE VI demolitions neglected to be resettled in the newly renovated communities that replaced their razed former homes. Instead, the majority of these individuals were either assigned to old public housing or given housing vouchers.<sup>36</sup> This failure to rehouse the displaced recalls local housing authorities' tenant eligibility policies enforced during public housing's first phase and suggests how the public housing program has returned to its original selective intentions.

Though HUD and HOPE VI aspire to dismantle vestiges of past economic, social, and racial discrimination, the public housing program's bigoted past continues to influence its future development. Echoing previous scholars, authors Margery Austin Turner, Susan J. Popkin, and Lynette Rawlings confirm segregation's detrimental impact on the public housing program. Yet in evaluating current policy, their book, *Public Housing and the Legacy of Segregation*, argues that contemporary policymakers fail to adequately acknowledge or incorporate the program's troubled racist history, especially when considering attempts to empower tenants and place them in healthy communities. The authors contend that policymakers' refusal to acknowledge discrimination and segregation's role in creating urban ghettos will hurt public housing, as officials and residents seek a transformation away from being segregated, low-income housing.

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<sup>35</sup> Goetz, *New Deal Ruins*, 11–12.

<sup>36</sup> 2002 survey cited in Vale, *Purging the Poorest*, 25.

Though *Public Housing and the Legacy of Segregation* questions public housing's forthcoming functionality from a planning standpoint, the authors' plea for "*race conscious*" policy provides a platform from which to contend for local Austinites' efforts to preserve the historic Rosewood Courts.<sup>37</sup>

Chapter Four highlights HACA's operations in public housing's third phase, emphasizing the need to advocate for Rosewood Courts' preservation and rehabilitation. HACA's reasons to reconfigure Rosewood recall elements of Lawrence Vale's concept of "design politics," wherein architects and policy makers imbue public housing with particular political values and intentions, such as which people to house and how to house them.<sup>38</sup> HACA's proposed mixed-income development indeed functions as an "expression of power," as the housing authority fixated on its design as *the* answer for Rosewood's problems.<sup>39</sup> HACA's plan instigated the city council and preservationists' efforts to publicize the Courts' importance and gain its inclusion on the National Register of Historic Places. The fight over Rosewood Courts recalls the City of Austin's established disregard for its African-American community and its history, which, I argue, speaks to larger problems in historic preservation. The preservation of Rosewood Courts offers a chance to diversify preservationist efforts while saving a valuable landmark where narratives of Black history and government policy can be communicated to a broad public audience. The Courts' significance in local and national housing history, as well as its importance as evidence of segregation and public housing's discriminatory past, merits its protection and continued presence in quickly-gentrifying East Austin.

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<sup>37</sup> Turner, Popkin, and Rawlings, *Public Housing and the Legacy of Segregation*, xii–xiv; original emphasis included.

<sup>38</sup> Vale, *Purging the Poorest*, 31.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

The following study of Austin's African-American public housing units exposes how the Housing Authority of the City of Austin purposefully designed and constructed their complexes, including Rosewood Courts and Booker T. Washington, with the direct intention of uplifting the deserving working class and non-white groups. HACA used these projects to groom Black and Latino Austinites for a more middle-class existence in line with contemporary social and civic values while ensuring these residents' segregation and enduring second-class citizenship. In the years after their construction, these complexes followed a national trend in which predominately Black public housing complexes slid into disrepair and fostered dangerous living environments, with tenants' claims routinely dismissed by local governments and housing officials. Because Austin's public housing functioned as a microcosm of the national program's evolution, Rosewood Courts, in danger of demolition or significant reconstruction, must be preserved and recognized for its consequence in local and national history, shaping Austin's Black community, and embodying the public housing program's optimistic spirit during its earliest days.

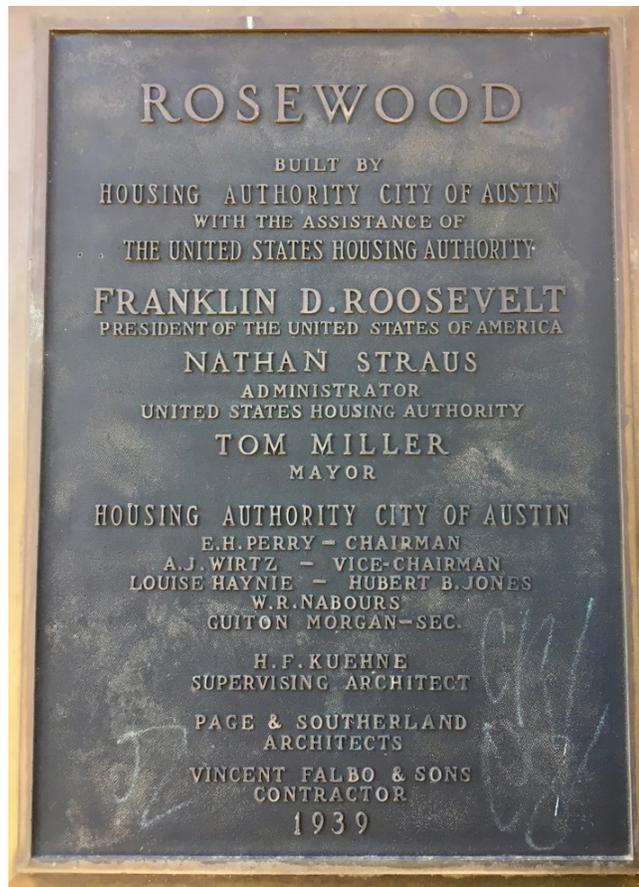


Figure 2: Rosewood Courts plaque. This marker was installed at the project after its completion in 1939. Photo by Lindsey Waldenberg.

## 2. SUBURBANIZING THE SOUTHWESTERN SLUM: HOW PUBLIC HOUSING OFFICIALS ATTEMPTED TO ASSIMILATE AUSTIN'S BLACK AND LATINO WORKING CLASS, 1937–1947

### I. Introduction

On December 28, 1941, the 332 families living in Austin's public housing projects busied themselves in preparation for an open house celebration. The Housing Authority of the City of Austin (HACA) invited Austinites from all over the city to witness firsthand the success of Santa Rita Courts, Rosewood Courts, and Chalmers Courts, some of the nation's earliest public housing funded by the United States Housing Authority (USHA).<sup>40</sup> This open house aimed to show off how the courts' community spirit, educational and recreational programs, and well-maintained units and yards revolutionized the lives of East Austin's poor. As explained by Mrs. E.B. Kuehne, HACA's tenant relations counselor, the residents' wellbeing would deeply influence the city's overall "behavior pattern."<sup>41</sup> "What happens to the housing project folk," she concluded, "concerns all of Austin."<sup>42</sup> The event served to commemorate the USHA's efficacy as a government program while signaling HACA's intent to rehabilitate Austin's poor into industrious members of society through the experience of living in quality

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<sup>40</sup> The USHA marked one of President Franklin D. Roosevelt's final New Deal programs. Established by the Housing Act of 1937, the decentralized USHA operated primarily by funding cities' public housing projects through loans that covered up to 90 percent of the total construction costs.

<sup>41</sup> "Open Housing Set Today for 3 Housing Projects," *Austin Statesman*, December 28, 1941, accessed October 2, 2016, <https://www.austinlibrary.com:8443/login?url=http://search.proquest.com/docview/1611597789?accountid=7451>.

<sup>42</sup> "Open Housing Set Today for 3 Housing Projects."

housing.

HACA had accomplished much in just four years. Austin's city council established the housing authority during a meeting on December 23, 1937, to address the many substandard houses that afflicted what they called the city's blighted areas.<sup>43</sup> Run-down structures, which rented at exorbitant figures to low-income families, they argued, needed to be repaired or eradicated.<sup>44</sup> While beautifying Austin, the city government also set a goal of uplifting its citizens to align with American values, which closely tied homeownership to patriotism, morality, and companionate family life.<sup>45</sup> Joining in a national conversation, Austin engaged in a decades-old fight to eradicate urban slums and give impoverished families access to safe, clean, and modern living quarters while seeing these advances in terms of outsiders' assimilation to cultural norms. Americans of the late 1930s, still reeling from the Great Depression, interpreted homeownership as part of the "good life," which provided "happiness as well as protection in a rapidly changing world."<sup>46</sup> Because poor families could not afford their own homes, Austinites aimed to give public housing's inhabitants—largely minoritized people—access to proper housing and its benefits; namely, its influence in molding productive citizens and enriching their

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<sup>43</sup> In this period, many used the word "blight" to describe the most impoverished, dilapidated slums of an urban area. This word took on extremely negative connotations and became intimately associated with crime and racial prejudice. See Brentin Mock, "The Meaning of Blight," *City Lab*, February 16, 2017, accessed May 27, 2017, <https://www.citylab.com/equity/2017/02/the-meaning-of-blight/516801>.

<sup>44</sup> Housing Authority of the City of Austin, *Annual Report for 1938–1939* (Austin, TX: Housing Authority of the City of Austin, 1939), 8.

<sup>45</sup> LeeAnn Lands, "Be a Patriot, Buy a Home: Re-Imagining Home Owners and Home Ownership in Early 20<sup>th</sup> Century Atlanta," *Journal of Social History* 41, no. 4 (Summer 2008): 943, accessed December 1, 2016, <http://www.jstor.org.libproxy.txstate.edu/stable/25096563>.

<sup>46</sup> Elaine Tyler May, "Myths and Realities of the American Family," in *A History of Private Life: Riddles of Identity in Modern Times*, vol. 5, ed. Antoine Prost and Gerard Vincent (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1991), 540.

families' development, all within a socially-accepted racially segregated context.

Despite HACA's historical importance as a pioneering participant in the USHA's program, Austin's place in the story of American public housing has been widely ignored.<sup>47</sup> Most studies of American public housing have focused on large urban metropolises, primarily in the industrial North or the Deep South. As a smaller city in the Southwest, Austin's invisibility in the story of public housing is not that surprising despite its importance as a regional capital and as the first arena for future President Lyndon B. Johnson's particular brand of democratic politics. As stipulated in the Housing Act of 1937, cities across the country voluntarily opted to conduct public housing experiments, holding almost complete responsibility for buildings' planning and construction.<sup>48</sup> Austin quickly signed on to forge this new direction in government assistance. Yet its participation in the federal program forced the City of Austin to reconcile with established patterns of discrimination against its poor white, African-American, and Mexican-American residents. Austin's place at the forefront of the first era in American public housing begs certain questions that remain unanswered. How did Austin's earliest public housing complexes, some of the first USHA projects in the country, reflect the period's prevailing local and national cultural and social engineering ideals? And how did these complexes function within the city's racist atmosphere at the time?

As part of a national embrace of the home's rehabilitative potential, Austin

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<sup>47</sup> Austin was the first city in the country to receive federal funding from the USHA, successfully complete its federally-funded housing projects, and move its selected tenants into new complexes.

<sup>48</sup> Kenneth T. Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 224–225.

officials created the city's initial public housing program between 1937 and the mid-1940s, designing what they saw as brick-and-mortar examples of New Deal-era values, with an emphasis on citizenship, integrity, hard work, and the congenial family unit.<sup>49</sup> In providing new low-income housing in a natural yet urban setting, Santa Rita Courts, Rosewood Courts, and Chalmers Courts offered working-class citizens specialized encounters with America's coveted suburban lifestyle.<sup>50</sup> The City of Austin, HACA, and by extension the federal government, used these complexes and their settings to try to elevate three racially-distinct working-class populations and simultaneously maintain segregation and ensure the limited mobility of Austin's underclass.

## II. Politicians' and Local Residents' Support for HACA and its Experiment

Soon after HACA's establishment, the housing authority's council members, Austin Mayor Tom Miller, select members of the city council, and even Congressman Lyndon B. Johnson embarked on a campaign to educate citizens on HACA's goals and missions.<sup>51</sup> Public housing advocates recognized that success for the proposed projects depended on winning local support, yet public housing was a polarizing issue from the start. In particular, those selling public housing had to overcome local skepticism over the federal government's perceived expanded role in city affairs. Some Austinites, including City Councilman Simon Gillis, firmly resisted the state's unprecedented intervention into what they considered the rightful place of private markets and local officials. They saw public housing as an intrusion rather than an aid for the deserving working-class.<sup>52</sup> At a

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<sup>49</sup> Lands, "Be a Patriot, Buy a Home," 943.

<sup>50</sup> Santa Rita Courts served Mexican-American families, Rosewood Courts housed African-American families, and Chalmers Courts served white families.

<sup>51</sup> Housing Authority of the City of Austin, *Annual Report for 1938-1939*, 8.

<sup>52</sup> Elaine Tyler May, "Myths and Realities of the American Family," 558.

January 1938 Austin City Council meeting, Gillis spoke out against the federal government's involvement and described the City of Austin's slum clearance plan as "a socialistic move" that would fail to benefit "the real poor man," as the program "cater[ed] to the man with income of \$40 to \$60 a month" rather than the destitute.<sup>53</sup> Moreover, many Austinites balked at providing assistance to people of color during a time of racism and segregation. Other locals, unclear about the "equivalent elimination" provisions stipulated in the Housing Act of 1937, worried that HACA would fail to construct enough new units and thus cause an overall shortage of low-cost housing, resulting in the overcrowding of other slum areas. HACA Chairman E.H. Perry sought to assuage such concerns by reminding Austinites of the housing program's requirement "that for each new unit built a substandard unit be demolished," which guaranteed needed replacement units for those homes destroyed.<sup>54</sup> The "equivalent elimination" approach protected landowners' real estate interests by limiting oversupply and satisfied housing reformers' desires for slum clearance. Moreover, this provision assured that public housing would not compete with the private market but rather exist only in areas where market forces were absent.<sup>55</sup> Despite some citizens' reservations, the success of Roosevelt's New Deal programs encouraged people to embrace bureaucratic aid as a way to help downtrodden individuals and their families, whether by turning to federal agencies for help or

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<sup>53</sup> Lorraine Barnes, "City Okehs Slum Bonds After Long Hullabaloo," *Austin Statesman*, January 27, 1938, accessed December 2, 2016, <https://www.austinlibrary.com:8443/login?url=http://www.austinlibrary.com:2400/docview/1610279068?accountid=7451>.

<sup>54</sup> "No Low-Cost Rent House Shortage Seen: Problem Taken Care of, Says Perry," *Austin Statesman*, March 23, 1939, accessed January 14, 2017, <https://www.austinlibrary.com:8443/login?url=http://www.austinlibrary.com:2400/docview/1610231290?accountid=7451>

<sup>55</sup> Edward G. Goetz, *New Deal Ruins: Race, Economic Justice, & Public Housing Policy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013), 28.

advocating for the existence of such government assistance.<sup>56</sup>

Mayor Tom Miller became an avid spokesman for the proposed projects' benefits. In January 1938, Miller addressed concerns about low-income housing's effects on real estate values, tax rates, and the future of the city as a whole. He emphasized Austin's history as the Republic of Texas's capital, seeking to reduce fears that public housing would compromise existing infrastructure. Just as the Texas founders chose Austin to launch their new republic, he told local residents, Austin had the unique privilege to be at the forefront of the public housing experiment. The city's development "was no accident of birth; it was planned in terms of beauty and desirability."<sup>57</sup> Likewise, any public housing would be constructed thoughtfully to benefit the city and ensure that "the vision of our forefathers be justified."<sup>58</sup> Miller hoped to generate support for the innovative government program by appealing to Austinites' pride in their history and heritage, suggesting that Texas's spirit of exploration made the city suitable for seizing this challenge.

Congressman Lyndon B. Johnson also campaigned for public housing, helping to commandeer greater support for HACA's operations. As he made political deals in

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<sup>56</sup> Robert B. Fairbanks, *The War on Slums in the Southwest* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2014), 49.

<sup>57</sup> "Miller Points Way to More Jobs," *Austin Statesman*, January 21, 1938, accessed October 2, 2016, <https://www.austinlibrary.com:8443/login?url=http://search.proquest.com/docview/1610277185?accountid=7451>.

<sup>58</sup> "Miller Points Way to More Jobs."

Washington, D.C., Johnson worked to attract local backing for public housing.<sup>59</sup> A few days after Mayor Miller's remarks, Congressman Johnson gave a radio address in which he appealed to Austinites' sympathies to eradicate the city's squalid housing.<sup>60</sup> While walking around the Capitol building on December 25, 1937, Johnson "found one family that might almost be called typical," who crowded together in one dirty, windowless room, with no sunlight or air flow.<sup>61</sup> Johnson lamented Santa Claus's failure to visit this household's ten children, sick father, and working mother on Christmas that year.

Johnson declared that he, for one, would refuse to ignore the "needless suffering and deprivation" that plagued the city's poorest and marked a "cancerous blight" on the entirety of Austin's community.<sup>62</sup> Johnson echoed contemporary rhetoric that connected crime, disease, and immorality with slums—thinking that fit in the dominant national logic regarding slum clearance. Johnson predicted that replacing low-income Austinites' dilapidated sheds with better affordable housing would bolster the surrounding area's property values as well as those of the entire city. By supporting HACA and its effort, Austinites would invest in their community's future. The attractive new complexes would provide air, light, and running water, with "windows to let in the sunshine; and strong

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<sup>59</sup> Johnson reportedly orchestrated the quick approval of HACA's application to the USHA. Johnson helped to convince Austin City Council to create HACA during the council's December 23, 1937, meeting. HACA then almost immediately submitted an application to the federal agency. USHA Administrator Nathan Straus announced Austin's receipt of federal funding just three weeks later. Johnson repeatedly publicized HACA's successes, even showing photographs of the new projects to President Franklin D. Roosevelt.

<sup>60</sup> The speech's title, "Tarnish on the Violet Crown," nodded to Austin's symbolic legacy as the "City of the Violet Crown."

<sup>61</sup> Lyndon B. Johnson, "Tarnish on the Violet Crown," Radio Address by Honorable Lyndon B. Johnson, January 23, 1933, Austin Housing General Vertical File, Austin History Center, Austin, TX.

<sup>62</sup> Johnson, "Tarnish on the Violet Crown."

walls to hold back the chill of winter,” and thus a healthier environment for tenants’ children and Austin’s posterity.<sup>63</sup>



Figure 3: An East Austin slum, 1940. Courtesy 34454, Austin History Center, Austin Public Library.

Some Austinites joined in the campaign for providing low-income residents access to the same basic amenities and social benefits enjoyed in suburban households. Such popular endorsement of low-income housing provision reflected a cultural ideal, cultivated by the federal government, that celebrated homeownership as the “physical expression” of independence, innovation, and “freedom of spirit.”<sup>64</sup> Influenced by President Herbert Hoover’s 1931 National Conference on Home Building and Home Ownership, Americans of the 1930s equated good citizenship with homeownership. Private dwellings that had been earned through hard work, so the logic went, fostered happier marriages, healthier children, social and economic stability, patriotism, and the

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<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>64</sup> Herbert Hoover, “Address to the White House Conference on Home Ownership,” (speech, Washington, D.C., December 2, 1931), The American Presidency Project, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=22927>.

“courage to meet the battle of life.”<sup>65</sup> Though not all Americans could own their own residences, living in housing that closely resembled the typical suburban home marked a “stepping-stone to... the American dream.”<sup>66</sup> Given the federal government’s widespread involvement in a number of aspects of American life during this period, many Austinites expressed their belief in these national principles when participating in the city’s public housing debate of January 1938.

Certain Austin social clubs and writers touted these benefits of domestic stability, declaring their “powerful approval” and eventually convincing the City of Austin to build public housing.<sup>67</sup> In addition to business leaders and philanthropists, Texan clubwomen promoted low-income housing in hopes that slum clearance would improve life in the city as a whole.<sup>68</sup> Members of the local women’s clubs saw public housing as aligning with their national organization’s goals of improving their own communities through volunteer service.<sup>69</sup> At a January 1938 public meeting, one hundred federated clubwomen adopted “a resolution of ‘intelligent support’” for HACA, adding much-needed public backing to the cause.<sup>70</sup> Similarly, the author of “I Favor Slum Clearance,” an editorial published in the *Austin Statesman*, encouraged readers to endorse the public housing idea. Along with citing common logic that higher-quality homes bred healthier and better people, the author suggested that the industrious nature of America’s “rank and file”

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<sup>65</sup> Hoover, “Address to the White House Conference on Home Ownership.”

<sup>66</sup> Lawrence M. Friedman, “Public Housing and the Poor: An Overview,” *California Law Review*, 54, no. 2, (May 1966): 649.

<sup>67</sup> “Slums Battle Aided by Club Women,” *Austin Statesman*, January 25, 1938, accessed October 2, 2016, <https://www.austinlibrary.com:8443/login?url=http://search.proquest.com/docview/1610277686?accountid=7451>.

<sup>68</sup> Fairbanks, *The War on Slums in the Southwest*, 28.

<sup>69</sup> “History and Mission,” Who We Are, last modified 2016, accessed November 27, 2016, <http://www.gfwc.org/who-we-are/history-and-mission/>.

<sup>70</sup> “Slums Battle Aided by Club Women.”

entitled them to similar decent housing enjoyed by the middle class.<sup>71</sup> These honorable Americans were not “riff-raff” or “objects of charity.”<sup>72</sup> Instead, they were victims of circumstances beyond their control, invariably exasperated by the 1930s economic collapse. Though these “nice people” were slighted economically, they and their children had a “constitutional right to pursue such happiness,” as defined by water, light, a garden, and a yard to play in.<sup>73</sup> Such supporters had an environmentalist rationale for the argument. By granting low-income Austinites access to the same fundamental resources enjoyed by middle- and upper-class homeowners, the families of public housing would eventually give back to the community, particularly through their well-adjusted children. Despite pushback against the formation of HACA, many influential local citizens backed the organization and its plans to extend the rights of healthy living to slum dwellers.

Miller, Johnson, and other Austinites recall the concerns communicated by architects and city planners regarding substandard housing in the 1930s and 1940s. According to Karen A. Franck and Michael Mostroller, this period’s new low-income housing sought to increase available light and air to its residents, who often lacked such basic amenities in their previous slum dwellings. Abstract conceptions of light and air, considered “intrinsically good,” served to measure dwellings’ levels of sanitation, safety,

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<sup>71</sup> “I Favor Slum Clearance,” *Austin Statesman*, January 23, 1938, accessed October 2, 2016, <https://www.austinlibrary.com:8443/login?url=http://search.proquest.com/docview/1611418996?accountid=7451>.

<sup>72</sup> “I Favor Slum Clearance.”

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.* Current events illustrate that this “constitutional right” to adequate living situations still eludes some Americans, making this issue continually relevant to our society today.

and morality.<sup>74</sup> This emphasis on light and air, as well as the availability of open recreational outdoor space, reflected both architects' and city officials' concerns with occupants' physical welfare.<sup>75</sup> HACA regularly inspected the apartments as a way to encourage tenants to improve their own standards of living while also maintaining the premises' sanitation levels. Interaction with clean environments, officials argued, would grant public housing tenants experience with the type of pleasant, humane settings afforded to the middle and upper class. The units' bright and airy atmospheres would serve to encourage renters to take pride in their surroundings and thus better themselves, increasing the "satisfaction they get out of life."<sup>76</sup> Like other public housing of this first period, these projects' goals focused on persuading residents to pursue jobs, education, and opportunities that would better align with the acceptable white middle-class standard of living, which emphasized thrift, enterprise, familial harmony, and self-sufficiency.<sup>77</sup> Furthermore, the complexes would mark a small victory against the endemic "new and more threatening kind of poverty" that developed out of the Great Depression.<sup>78</sup> These new communities strove to strengthen families' psychological and emotional health, therefore signifying progress from the Great Depression's extremely debilitating impacts on the

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<sup>74</sup> Karen A. Franck and Michael Mostoller, "From Courts to Open Space to Streets: Changes in the Site Design of U.S. Public Housing," *Journal of Architectural and Planning Research*, 12, no. 3 (Autumn 1995): 191, accessed September 17, 2016, [www.jstor.org/stable/43029163](http://www.jstor.org/stable/43029163).

<sup>75</sup> Franck and Mostoller, "From Courts to Open Space to Streets," 199.

<sup>76</sup> Housing Authority of the City of Austin, *Annual Report for 1946 and 1947* (Austin, TX: Housing Authority of the City of Austin, 1947), 8.

<sup>77</sup> Winifred D. Wandersee, *Women's Work and Family Values, 1920–1940* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), 1–2.

<sup>78</sup> Steven Mintz and Susan Kellogg, *Domestic Revolutions: A Social History of American Family Life* (New York: The Free Press, 1988), 134.

city's established poor.<sup>79</sup>

### III. Austin's Engineered Slums

Concrete evidence justified public figures' crusade for housing reform in Austin. For example, HACA conducted surveys in 1938 and 1939 to evaluate the state of the city's blighted areas. One February 1938 survey labeled over 60 percent of the 1,697 surveyed homes in East Austin as substandard, which meant that they needed major repairs, lacked sanitary facilities, or were deemed unfit for use. In addition, HACA determined through a study of police records that the areas with the worst housing conditions—namely East Austin—correlated with the highest instances of crime and public health problems.<sup>80</sup>

Though officials may have assumed a natural coincidence between housing conditions and crime and public health problems, the city government itself was responsible for this concentration of poverty and crime. The City of Austin forcibly rendered East Austin, long associated with the city's African-American population, as Austin's primary non-white area with adoption of the Koch and Fowler engineering plan in 1928. The Koch and Fowler Plan advocated for the creation of a "Negro District" in East Austin, which segregated Black residents while bypassing inconvenient zoning laws and the wasteful duplication of facilities, such as Black and white parks.<sup>81</sup> In pursuit of this Black district, the City of Austin began providing basic educational and recreational facilities and services to African Americans in this area alone, forcing many Black families' relocation to East Austin.

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<sup>79</sup> Mintz and Kellogg, *Domestic Revolutions*, 108.

<sup>80</sup> Housing Authority of the City of Austin, *Annual Report for 1938–1939*, 11.

<sup>81</sup> Koch and Fowler, Engineers, *A City Plan for Austin* (Austin, TX: Koch and Fowler, Engineers, 1928), 66–67.

The Home Owners Loan Corporation (HOLC), established in 1933, further segregated Black and Latino residents on the east side. As HOLC began appraising neighborhoods across the country, the organization employed a universal rating system that disproportionately undervalued mixed, non-white, dense, or older neighborhoods. The HOLC created Residential Security Maps that rated neighborhoods' safety and value in terms of "ethnic and racial worth."<sup>82</sup> These racist methods and maps, later adopted by the Federal Housing Administration, resulted in the redlining of East Austin, which intentionally harmed area residents by refusing to offer them government-backed mortgages and other services.<sup>83</sup> Therefore, by the time HACA's search for feasible sites began in 1938, East Austin had become a condensed area of poverty and Black and Latino inhabitants who were barred from the domestic comfort or choice of municipal services provided to the white middle class.

East Austin's low-income population, as well as its low property values, rendered the area the most fitting place for HACA's first public housing complexes. Austin's City Plan Commission, chaired by Rosewood Courts' supervising architect H.F. Kuehne, affirmed the area's explicit "racial character" through a February 1938 resolution.<sup>84</sup> The resolution considered locations for the projects as related to the adopted city plan, East Austin's existing Black and Latino populations, and access to racially-segregated facilities and city services. The commission declared that HACA's three chosen sites

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<sup>82</sup> Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, 199.

<sup>83</sup> "History of Austin's Racial Divide in Maps," *Austin American Statesman*, January 2015, accessed November 27, 2016, <http://projects.statesman.com/news/economic-mobility/>.

<sup>84</sup> City Plan Commission of the City of Austin, February 7, 1938, Resolution, cited in Fred L. McGhee, "Rosewood Courts," National Register of Historic Places Nomination Form (Austin, TX: Texas Historical Commission, May 2014), section 7, 6.

were “desirably and practically located and properly fitting into the City Plan of the City of Austin.”<sup>85</sup> The group called for the city council to rezone the designated areas so as to allow residential development and, by extension, public housing construction.

The City Plan Commission’s rezoning recommendations, later approved by Austin City Council, supported HACA’s plans. In March 1938, HACA Chairman E.H. Perry stated that the housing units’ chosen locations existed in “neighborhoods substantially dominated by the racial groups they will serve,” so as to prevent disrupting existing communities.<sup>86</sup> HACA claimed that the selected sites for the African-American, Mexican-American, and white housing complexes would have easy access to transportation, schools, churches, and recreational centers to enrich the inhabitants’ lives and personal development.<sup>87</sup> In addition, Chalmers Courts’ projected eighty white units, Santa Rita Courts’ sixty Mexican-American units, and Rosewood Courts’ forty African-American units would permanently “beautify and improve” the surrounding neighborhoods then dotted by run-down slums, consequently creating an atmosphere more compatible with existing ideas surrounding city planning and community

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<sup>85</sup> City Plan Commission of the City of Austin, Resolution, cited in “Rosewood Courts,” section 7, 6.

<sup>86</sup> “Economy Practiced in Housing Set-Up,” *Austin Statesman*, March 14, 1938, accessed October 2, 2016, <https://www.austinlibrary.com:8443/login?url=http://search.proquest.com/docview/1611418996?accountid=7451>.

<sup>87</sup> East Austin residents used segregated public transportation to travel to their jobs in other areas of the city, including homes in affluent West Austin. Electric streetcars operated throughout Austin from 1891 to 1940, when the City of Austin began using buses in their stead. At the system’s peak in the 1920s, these electric streetcars navigated twenty-three miles of track to serve the city’s population of 40,000, including lines along present-day Cesar Chavez Street and East Sixth Street in East Austin. In 1906, African-American Austinites unsuccessfully boycotted streetcar segregation. See Bruce Hunt, “Austin’s First Electric Streetcar Era,” *Not Even Past*, March 17, 2013, accessed June 24, 2017, <http://notevenpast.org/austins-first-electric-streetcar-era>; Housing Authority of the City of Austin, *Annual Report for 1938–1939*, 12.

wellbeing, such as the creation of suburban-like green space and the semblance of proper homeownership.<sup>88</sup>

HACA's selection of sites in East Austin confirmed the housing authority's goals of elevating Austin's low-income residents, but only to an extent deemed suitable for the city's Black, Latino, and poor white populations.<sup>89</sup> Like other national housing authorities, HACA's decision to construct in Austin's "Negro District" avoided "visceral" white, middle-class backlash expressed by those who balked at living close to public housing or contested the complexes' perceived effects on their real estate interests.<sup>90</sup>

Perhaps because segregation was an accepted way of life, HACA did not mention that East Austin represented the housing authority's only real option for their affordable housing experiment, as it marked the sole municipal area that had schools, churches, and other amenities available to Black Austinites. The complexes' locations ensured that while these improved citizens could spread their influence to their neighbors and surrounding community, they would continue to live and operate within their appropriate segregated spheres and maintain this area's established racial identity; better housing conditions did not readily translate into tenants' potential intrusion into the white middle class. HACA's solution of using public housing to uplift East Austin's residents worked only to partially fix the city's engineered slums rather than eliminate the area's

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<sup>88</sup> "Economy Practiced in Housing Set-Up."

<sup>89</sup> The City of Austin made these sites available to HACA by either purchasing land from property owners or seizing tracts by eminent domain. For Rosewood Courts, select tracts were bought from the former city attorney and other tracts were seized from African-American homeowners. The City of Austin also seized the African-American Emancipation Park via eminent domain. McGhee, "Rosewood Courts," 25.

<sup>90</sup> Goetz, *New Deal Ruins*, 31–32.

underlying inequality problem fueled by racism and poverty.

#### IV. The Projects as a Taste of the American Ideal

When designing the three projects, HACA and its architects adhered to popular thought and architectural trends regarding the 1930s ideal home. Among other media outlets and publications, magazines promoted the idea of the perfect suburban home and the domestic tranquility it seemingly provided. In its October 1938 issue, *Better Homes and Gardens* published “Concrete Example of a Dream House,” one installment of the magazine’s series on Bildcost Home Plans. This series provided building plans and monetary advice for Americans who wished to achieve higher standards of living through homeownership. Designed by San Antonio architects Atlee B. Ayres and Robert M. Ayres, this “petite package of comfort and beauty” was based directly on the qualities readers reportedly expressed desiring in a home.<sup>91</sup> The plans balanced the low-cost home’s aesthetic, convenience, and roominess with its affordable small square footage. Made for the average economical homemaker who “insist[ed] that beauty and utility get together on intimate terms,” the house used prefabricated stock materials to conserve money while simultaneously maintaining the home’s attractiveness.<sup>92</sup> The installation of fireproof concrete blocks, now “popular in homebuilding,” ensured the home’s permanence without the need for constant maintenance.<sup>93</sup> Its basic design consisted of a living room, kitchen, bathroom, and two bedrooms, which provided for ease of function within a small-sized lot. *Better Homes and Gardens* contributor Gerald K. Geerlings praised these better-designed homes as a reflection of “our good common sense and our

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<sup>91</sup> “Concrete Example of a Dream House,” *Better Homes and Gardens*, October 1938, 30.

<sup>92</sup> “Concrete Example of a Dream House,” 30.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 81.

American background.”<sup>94</sup> According to Geerlings, the extravagant, overly-decorated homes of the 1920s took up too much space and money at the cost of the growing American family. Along with their economical design, the tastefully simple homes of the 1930s were better built and protected, with higher quality materials that augmented the dwellings’ sanitation and comfort.<sup>95</sup> Directed to the presumably white, middle-class readers of the magazine, *Better Homes and Gardens*’ promotion of manageable small-scale, affordable homes signified the prevailing social values regarding family harmony and domesticity that drove most Americans’ quests to buy their own property and thus achieve domestic happiness.

In order to create a version of the ideal home suitable for those receiving government assistance, architects and builders translated these coveted qualities into utilitarian housing for the poor. The designs of Santa Rita Courts, Rosewood Courts, and Chalmers Courts echoed popular notions of proper suburban living. Their plans focused on standards deemed necessary for sanitary quarters, such as ample square footage for kitchens, bedrooms, and living rooms. HACA desired the complexes to be similar yet slightly different in design, thereby allowing for experimentation in the most effective living arrangements and management.<sup>96</sup> Yet most units followed a standard layout much like that of *Better Homes and Gardens*’ “Dream House,” with a kitchen, a living room, a bathroom with indoor plumbing, and one, two, three, or sometimes four bedrooms. Similar to the “Dream House’s” architects, the complexes’ planners chose building materials, particularly concrete, for its durability and lack of need for repair. Builders

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<sup>94</sup> Gerald K. Geerlings, “Better Homes for Less Money,” *Better Homes and Gardens*, November 1938, 18.

<sup>95</sup> Geerlings, “Better Homes for Less Money,” 18–19.

<sup>96</sup> Housing Authority of the City of Austin, *Annual Report for 1938–1939*, 14.

installed prefabricated elements, such as metal window and door frames, in the aesthetically-simple housing units to save money and maintain standardization. All of the projects included outdoor areas to hang laundry, and HACA equipped every apartment with a gas range, a hot water heater, and a gas space heater.<sup>97</sup> As Chairman Perry explained, architects designed the complexes' individual units according to a "general beautification and healthful plan of grouping that call[ed] for plenty of 'space'" for tenants, which maximized the available area for playgrounds, light and air, and overall pleasant appearance.<sup>98</sup> The units' uniformity within their respective complexes provided resident families with a new type of imposed neighborhood, populated by people of their own race and socio-economic status. Each virtually identical unit, influenced by dominating architectural trends, combined to create three federally-approved communities. HACA and Austin's public considered these complexes as appropriate versions of the ideal American home for those who could not afford to purchase their own. Construction began on November 17, 1938, with all three projects considered completed by December 1939.<sup>99</sup>

As the first USHA project to be finished, Santa Rita Courts gained fame and historic status as a success of slum clearance and effective large-scale domestic design.<sup>100</sup> HACA built the complex on six acres of land bounded by Pedernales Street on the east, Second Street on the south, and Santa Rita Street on the north. The majority of Santa Rita's buildings extended in four parallel rows, oriented on a north-south axis to allow

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<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, 15–16.

<sup>98</sup> "AHA is Looking for Locations," *Austin Statesman*, January 28, 1938, accessed October 2, 2016, <https://www.austinlibrary.com:8443/login?url=http://search.proquest.com/docview/1610277960?accountid=7451>.

<sup>99</sup> Housing Authority of the City of Austin, *Annual Report for 1938–1939*, 16, 19.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

most buildings to receive morning or afternoon light, an important consideration for slum clearance advocates.<sup>101</sup> The one-story row houses' tiled exteriors and interiors included durable concrete floors and roof slabs. Each dwelling had its own front and back yard, which residents primarily used for hanging laundry or children's recreation. Though the project's Mexican-American tenants were "allowed to do whatever they want[ed] with the ground," HACA officials hoped that residents would use their backyards for gardens, like many other middle-class Americans.<sup>102</sup> The nearby Zavala School even demonstrated their own outdoor frame garden as a model for Santa Rita's families to copy.<sup>103</sup>

Private outdoor space, a marked step up from crowded substandard homes that populated East Austin, reflected contemporary ideas about the type of environments conducive for proper child rearing and family tranquility. Americans celebrated good housing and the outdoors as important to sustaining familial well-being. The single-family home, with its own yard, as President Hoover's National Conference on Home Building and Home Ownership put it, increased the "social stability and the happiness of our people."<sup>104</sup> HACA and its architects accentuated this new housing concept's responsibility for social development by including a large children's play space that

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<sup>101</sup> Fred L. McGhee and Gregory Smith, "Santa Rita Courts," National Register of Historic Places Registration Form (Austin, TX: Texas Historical Commission, September 6, 2006), 5.

<sup>102</sup> "Housing Blocks Numbers Fixed," *Austin Statesman*, May 11, 1939, accessed January 14, 2017, <https://www.austinlibrary.com:8443/login?url=http://search.proquest.com/docview/1610239611?accountid=7451>.

<sup>103</sup> "Frame Garden Constructed by Zavala Seventh Grade as Demonstration Project," *Austin Statesman*, December 15, 1939, accessed January 14, 2017, <https://www.austinlibrary.com:8443/login?url=http://search.proquest.com/docview/1610239611?accountid=7451>.

<sup>104</sup> Herbert Hoover, "Statement Announcing the White House Conference on Home Building and Home Ownership," (speech, Washington, D.C., September 15, 1931), The American Presidency Project, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=22804>.

bisected the property and served as the complex's focal point and primary social area.<sup>105</sup> Along with mirroring the "Dream House's" use of concrete and stock materials, Santa Rita's design imitated what Karen A. Franck and Michael Mostoller refer to as the first phase of America's public housing design: the court. Santa Rita's units' orientation around the complex's main playground and social space recalled this court approach, which was greatly influenced by the garden apartments of the 1920s. With their entrances removed from the street, these units' layouts gave the complex an insular focus and channeled community life into one central recreational area. The court template focused on cultivating new, therapeutic green space while removing harsh reminders of the surrounding urban landscape. Though the buildings were physically and socially distinct from their immediate geographical context, the court design allowed for nature and the city to co-exist without any radical or disruptive intrusions.<sup>106</sup> Santa Rita's inward focus sought to foster community-building, both by providing space for Mexican-American residents to connect and by encouraging them to meet what they saw as the proper standards of American living.

Located just a few blocks away, Rosewood Courts embodied American public housing architecture's second phase, known as the open space model. HACA built Rosewood on seven acres of land bordered by Chicon Street on the west, Rosewood Avenue on the north, and Poquito Street on the east. Much like Santa Rita, the complex consisted of one-story row houses with large front and back yards. However, designers inserted much more space between the parallel brick buildings and their concrete slabs, resulting in the evenly-spaced units sitting further apart. The project included three small

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<sup>105</sup> McGhee and Smith, "Sana Rita Courts," 5.

<sup>106</sup> Franck and Mostoller, "From Courts to Open Space to Streets," 190, 202.

play areas for the families the developers expected to attract and reflecting popular American sentiment that housing could encourage healthy social development. HACA's first annual report noted that Rosewood's attractive hillside location, dotted with large trees, added "much natural charm and beauty to the project" and elevated the quality of life for the complex's poor residents, whose previous homes had no such lush green space.<sup>107</sup> Rosewood's "open and undefined" outdoor area encapsulated public housing's open space model.<sup>108</sup> This model, exemplified by spread-out buildings and unfenced yards, sought to highlight the plot's natural landscape, with untamed nature surrounding buildings rather than buildings containing it. This design focused on isolating homes from their immediate urban context and provided residents with a suburban-like atmosphere. Just as nature marked a departure from the city, the project's openness counteracted the slums' closed-off qualities and encouraged the type of outdoor recreation not typically seen in slum areas.<sup>109</sup> Rosewood's unbounded lawns signified accessibility and universality to all of its Black residents, who had been previously barred from enjoying safe and well-maintained outdoor leisure space, a coveted quality seen in numerous middle-class homes.<sup>110</sup>

Chalmers Courts differed in basic architectural design compared to Santa Rita and Rosewood, mainly in its number of two-story and multi-level buildings. Built of brick with tile interiors, Chalmers included a number of large courtyards and a playground that

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<sup>107</sup> Housing Authority of the City of Austin, *Annual Report for 1938–1939*, 15.

<sup>108</sup> Franck and Mostoller, "From Courts to Open Space to Streets," 190.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, 205, 211.

<sup>110</sup> Rosewood was constructed in two phases. In the midst of building the complex's first sixty units, HACA received additional federal funding to construct seventy more units. This addition, constructed between February 1940 and January 1941, resulted in the series of two-story buildings located along Rosewood Avenue.

contributed to the project's "openness and livability."<sup>111</sup> Organized similarly to Santa Rita, Chalmers was constructed on seven acres surrounded by Fourth Street on the north, Third Street on the south, Comal Street on the west, and Chicon Street on the east. Most importantly, this location meant that the white public housing complex was situated the closest to downtown Austin. HACA's decision to place Chalmers in the best possible location represented a common theme of 1930s federal assistance, wherein Black and Latino families often received less aid than their white counterparts.<sup>112</sup> Even when building affordable housing for Austin's neediest families, HACA adhered to discriminatory urban planning policies that consistently favored whites over African Americans and Mexican Americans.

Through reflecting the era's typical home designs, Santa Rita Courts, Rosewood Courts, and Chalmers Courts adapted elements of the mainstream suburban lifestyle into the new public housing concept. The Austin projects' "court" and "open space" layouts, with their emphasis on sturdy construction and therapeutic outdoor areas, represented the typical (segregated) public housing architecture that arose in many cities during this initial period, as seen with Philadelphia's court-style James Weldon Johnson Homes, built in 1940 to house low-income Black residents. USHA-funded public housing's orderly complexes stood out from their surrounding neighborhoods' often run-down and crowded dwellings, thus symbolizing local activists, governments, and housing authorities' successes in "supporting, promoting, and carrying out" public housing reform

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<sup>111</sup> Housing Authority of the City of Austin, *Annual Report for 1938–1939*, 16.

<sup>112</sup> Mintz and Kellogg, *Domestic Revolutions*, 142.

on the local level.<sup>113</sup> As the earliest manifestations of the USHA and New Deal reforms, HACA's three original projects continue to exemplify the guiding philosophy behind the public housing program, as their original structures and layouts still remain intact and used as low-income housing almost eighty years later.

HACA purposefully designed the three complexes' contemporary and clean residences, along with their pleasing physical environments, with the aim of inspiring their tenants to dream of life beyond the courts. By implementing existing architectural trends deemed suitable for the typical American family, HACA hoped that the complexes would motivate its residents to work harder, seek greater social opportunities, and achieve desirable middle-class status, all within their designated race and communities. Through eliminating the slums, HACA and other housing authorities would fix society and offer suburbanized lifestyles to the deserving "poor but honest" worker.<sup>114</sup>



Figure 4: Chalmers Courts, 1949. The project offered modern and sanitary accommodations for low-income white families. Courtesy 34465, Austin History Center, Austin Public Library.

<sup>113</sup> Paul R. Lusignan, Judith Robison, Laura Bobeczko, and Jeffrey Shrimpton, "Public Housing in the United States, 1933–1949," National Register of Historic Places Multiple Property Documentation Form (Washington, D.C.: National Park Service, 2004), 49, 51

<sup>114</sup> Friedman, "Public Housing and the Poor: An Overview," 648.

## V. How the Courts Sought to Create “Upstanding Citizens”

For its first residents, HACA selected hardworking low-income families whose meager incomes precluded them from affording the “minimum essentials of a good home.”<sup>115</sup> When these families toured their future homes, HACA officials “got a real ‘kick’” seeing their responses to the modern amenities, particularly “chuckling most over the small Mexican lad” found “fondly patting the bathtub.”<sup>116</sup> Per the Housing Act of 1937, all three complexes only served families whose net incomes did not exceed five times the charged rents. HACA gave preference to families with children who lived in nearby substandard houses, providing them with the opportunity to experience “decent, safe, and sanitary dwelling[s]” for their own use.<sup>117</sup> Married blue-collar workers, employed as truck drivers, domestic servants, porters, restaurant employees, and construction workers, comprised the majority of applicants.<sup>118</sup> These selected families represented the “submerged middle class,” whose potential and drive for economic and social ascension made them perfect candidates for HACA’s new social programming.<sup>119</sup>

Some prospective tenants, namely Mexican Americans, hesitated to apply to the program. While African Americans competed for residency, HACA received a limited number of Mexican-American applications. Mexican Americans feared showing any type of citizenship papers out of concern over the Mexican government’s seizure of, and American government’s supposed retaliation against, undocumented immigrants; as such,

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<sup>115</sup> Housing Authority of the City of Austin, *Annual Report for 1938–1939*, 22.

<sup>116</sup> CEG, “Town Talk,” *Austin Statesman*, June 17, 1939, accessed January 14, 2017, <https://www.austinlibrary.com:8443/login?url=http://www.austinlibrary.com:2400/docview/1559167540?accountid=7451>.

<sup>117</sup> Housing Authority of the City of Austin, *Annual Report for 1938–1939*, 22.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>119</sup> Friedman, “Public Housing and the Poor: An Overview,” 646.

Mexican-American citizens often avoided even submitting applications.<sup>120</sup> HACA enlisted the help of the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC) to explain the process to the city's eight thousand Mexican Americans, though only a few would be accepted.<sup>121</sup> Despite HACA's concerns, the organization eventually collected 125 applications for Santa Rita's 40 available units. On the other hand, Austin's African-American population rushed to apply for tenancy. Though HACA did not open Rosewood until September 1, the agency had received forty-five residency applications by May 1939.<sup>122</sup> Eventually, Black families submitted 260 total applications for Rosewood's 60 spots. Prospective white tenants sent 232 applications for Chalmers's 86 units.<sup>123</sup>

Santa Rita's opening in June 1939 merited a grand celebration of the city government and federal government's successful realization of affordable housing. Hosted by HACA and the USHA, the event featured music, speeches by local, state, and federal officials, and even Mexican dances.<sup>124</sup> Santa Rita represented liberation for forty Mexican-American families from unsanitary slums and their chance at a "new lease on

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<sup>120</sup> "Mexicans Fear to Sign for AHA," *Austin Statesman*, March 14, 1939, accessed October 2, 2016, <https://www.austinlibrary.com:8443/login?url=http://search.proquest.com/docview/1610230274?accountid=7451>.

<sup>121</sup> "AHA's Machinery is Geared for Action," *Austin Statesman*, April 19, 1939, accessed October 2, 2016, <https://www.austinlibrary.com:8443/login?url=http://search.proquest.com/docview/1610236883?accountid=7451>.

<sup>122</sup> "AHA Will Meet to Select Aide," *Austin Statesman*, April 19, 1939, accessed January 14, 2017, <https://www.austinlibrary.com:8443/login?url=http://search.proquest.com/docview/1610239864?accountid=7451>.

<sup>123</sup> Housing Authority of the City of Austin, *Annual Report for 1938-1939*, 24.

<sup>124</sup> "AHA's Machinery is Geared for Action."

their economic life.”<sup>125</sup> With all three projects opened by January 1940, HACA worked to ensure that each complex served both as a model of effective low-income housing and as a “real contributing factor” to that area’s community life.<sup>126</sup> The provision of good homes with modern appliances and comforts represented only one aspect of the poor’s reconditioning. To help its residents achieve higher personal and moral standards, HACA began instituting community classes and programming that reflected a national reformist urge to assist families’ adjustments to modern living.<sup>127</sup> Such activities encouraged good citizenship, better parenting, and improved family relations within the home, demonstrating the state and external agencies’ involvement in the private sphere’s most intimate spaces.

Within a few years of their inception, each complex established community organizations that sponsored educational and social programs for their residents. Programs included Chalmers and Rosewood’s Christmas parties and Santa Rita’s assistance in instituting the city’s first tuberculosis testing program. All three projects hosted Well-Child Conferences. Run by the Austin Travis County Department of Public Health, these programs taught low-income families how to properly care for their children’s health. HACA strove to meet the tenants’ social needs through recreational programs conducted in partnership with the City Recreation Department. A number of sports, music, and youth clubs provided “wholesome recreation for all age groups” and

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<sup>125</sup> “Independence Day Will Mean Freedom from Slums,” *Austin Statesman*, June 14, 1939, accessed October 2, 2016, <https://www.austinlibrary.com:8443/login?url=http://search.proquest.com/docview/1610246293?accountid=7451>.

<sup>126</sup> Housing Authority of the City of Austin, *Annual Report for 1938–1939*, 29.

<sup>127</sup> Mintz and Kellogg, *Domestic Revolutions*, 119.

exemplified period ideas on suitable child rearing.<sup>128</sup> All three complexes operated home counseling programs designed to teach adults how to elevate their families' living standards through courses in conventional middle-class domestic tasks, such as sewing, food preparation and preservation, home decorating, and budgeting.<sup>129</sup> In addition to channeling coveted values of thrift and enterprise, these classes represented the type of expected duties performed by the maternal homemaker, an important component of the twentieth century's companionate family.<sup>130</sup> HACA further fostered its female tenants' motherly instincts through providing "Mother Ex-Cooperative" group classes at all three complexes. Sponsored by the Austin public schools, these monthly classes taught mothers about modern child care, juvenile developmental stages, child psychology, and the proper toys, music, and literature for each age group.<sup>131</sup>

Though the projects' educational courses aimed to give poor families the tools assumed to be needed for a satisfying domestic life, economic conditions prevented tenant families from fully adhering to American social expectations. As typical of the time, many of the poor mothers living in Santa Rita, Rosewood, and Chalmers worked outside of the home to supplement their families' incomes. The Great Depression hit Black and Latino families hard, as high unemployment rates, low wages, and shortage of well-paying or stable jobs barred many African-American and Mexican-American men from being effective breadwinners and fulfilling cultural notions of American

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<sup>128</sup> Housing Authority of the City of Austin, *Annual Report for 1946 and 1947*, 11–13.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*, 11–13.

<sup>130</sup> Mintz and Kellogg, *Domestic Revolutions*, 113.

<sup>131</sup> Dorace Caldwell, "Children's Play Schools Serve as Laboratories," *Austin Statesman*, May 3, 1945, accessed January 14, 2017, <https://www.austinlibrary.com:8443/login?url=http://www.austinlibrary.com:2400/docview/1609838846?accountid=7451>.

manhood.<sup>132</sup> HACA aimed to aid over-worked mothers by running nursery schools, which provided quality child care and produced “happy, well-nourished and ready-for-bed youngster[s]” for mothers to take home at the end of the day.<sup>133</sup> For example, the daily operations of Chalmers Courts’ nursery school, running from 7:30 a.m. to 6:30 p.m. each day but Sunday, solved working mothers’ dilemma about their children’s supervision. Along with good meals, rest periods, and Monday health exams, the nursery school’s mix of “training as well as play” guaranteed that students received “maximum care” while assuring parents “that the children [were] not being neglected.”<sup>134</sup> After its first year of operation, Chalmers Nursery school boasted improving its attendees’ emotional as well as physical growth. These children, previously unaccustomed to playing with others their own age, thrived in this “wholesome environment,” illustrated by their happiness and ample weight gain.<sup>135</sup>

Together, these programs and community resources represented a significant aspect of HACA’s plan for the projects to operate as active transformational centers. HACA intended to use them to develop “civic and community pride” and inspire proper citizenship among the complexes’ residents.<sup>136</sup> Along with encouraging good attitudes, the programs sought to equip residents with the ideal cultural tools needed to create their own typical American, white middle-class lifestyle, as much as they could within their

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<sup>132</sup> Mintz and Kellogg, *Domestic Revolutions*, 142.

<sup>133</sup> “Open Housing Set Today for 3 Housing Projects.”

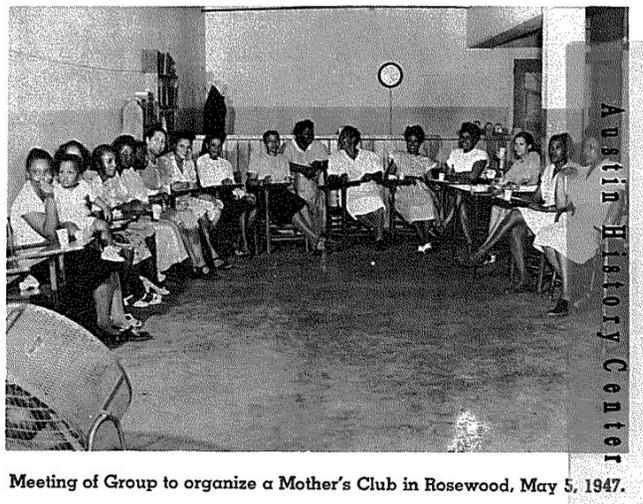
<sup>134</sup> “Chalmers Nursery Cares for Children of Working Mothers: Youngsters Get Daily Supervised Care.” *Austin Statesman*, September 19, 1943, accessed January 14, 2017, <https://www.austinlibrary.com:8443/login?url=http://www.austinlibrary.com:2400/docview/1611685883?accountid=7451>.

<sup>135</sup> “Project to Be Aided: More WPA Funds to AAUW Nursery,” *Austin Statesman*, September 17, 1942, accessed January 14, 2017, <https://www.austinlibrary.com:8443/login?url=http://www.austinlibrary.com:2400/docview/1610072554?accountid=7451>.

<sup>136</sup> Housing Authority of the City of Austin, *Annual Report for 1938–1939*, 29.

limited poor and non-white contexts. These new projects, with their clean environments, spacious yards, and social welfare programs, worked to provide their residents with the “essentials of a good home” in a “better and more beautiful Austin.”<sup>137</sup>

Yet despite these measures, HACA’s projects still tended to isolate Austin’s working poor. Each complex housed only one race and was located in what the public regarded as the worst part of the city, where substantial economic opportunities eluded residents. The projects’ segregated accommodations not only prevented the creation of one united Austin community but also pacified white citizens’ concerns about public housing’s impact on the existing status quo. Austin’s white upper- and middle-class populations came to support HACA’s experiment, but only did so knowing that these complexes would not wildly affect their everyday lives. Though now closer to white middle-class standards, Austin’s working poor would continue to mostly live on the stigmatized east side, thus maintaining the existing power balances that ruled Austin in the late 1930s and early 1940s.



Meeting of Group to organize a Mother’s Club in Rosewood, May 5, 1947.

Figure 5: Rosewood Courts Mother’s Club, 1947. Courtesy of The Housing Authority of the City of Austin’s 1946–1947 Annual Report, Austin History Center, Austin Public Library.

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<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

## VI. Conclusion

Santa Rita Courts, Rosewood Courts, and Chalmers Courts successfully situated the city's poor populations in carefully planned communities that recalled the best aspects of the era's white middle-class experience. Together, these three projects provide "first-rate clues" about local and national patterns of urban development, social engineering, politics, and public values and culture.<sup>138</sup> Austin's public housing architecture, as well as the city's support for the new experiment, demonstrates that the three complexes embodied the period's social and cultural beliefs, which heralded homeownership and hard work as paths to democratic communities, familial unity, and domestic bliss. Along with rendering these domestic ideals accessible to qualifying poor Americans, the projects' extensive social programming and modern architectural designs, built with high-quality materials, communicated the benefits of the brand-new USHA program to cities and governments of different sizes across the country.<sup>139</sup>

While Austin's public housing projects still stand as evidence of the period's progressive slum clearance strategies, their presence also alludes to the both the city and nation's on-going, problematic relationships with low-income housing. HACA's notably nicer units marked a significant improvement from East Austin's slums, but the housing authority did not remedy its tenants' persistent subjugation. Instead, Austin and its housing authority used these federally-funded affordable housing units to maintain segregation and limit the poor population's potential economic and social mobility. Santa Rita, Rosewood, and Chalmers' isolated communities upheld the city's deeply entrenched

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<sup>138</sup> Marta Gutman, *A City for Children: Women, Architecture, and the Charitable Landscape of Oakland, 1850–1950* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2014), 37.

<sup>139</sup> McGhee and Smith, "Santa Rita Courts," 8.

institutionalized racism and satisfied white Austinites' concerns regarding the city's existing power and racial structures, thereby laying groundwork for HACA and its program's future troubles. HACA's commitment to segregated housing and the residents' low socio-economic status helped prevent many people marked by race and poverty from finding true inclusion into the larger Austin community for decades to come, much to the relief of many wealthy and middle-class Austinites. The push to assimilate African Americans, Mexican Americans, and the white working poor into the middle class clearly had its limits.

### 3. LIFE IN HACA'S "GHETTO": THE DECLINE OF AUSTIN'S

#### BLACK PUBLIC HOUSING, 1950–1975

##### I. Introduction

Encouraged by the successful construction and operation of Rosewood Courts, Santa Rita Courts, and Chalmers Courts, in the 1950s, Austin and its self-proclaimed “progressive” housing authority forged ahead with the city’s public housing experiment.<sup>140</sup> At the outset of the decade, the Housing Authority of the City of Austin (HACA) and the U.S. Housing and Home Finance Agency (HHFA) continued their original strategy of seeking residents they deemed to be respectable, upstanding working-class families judged deserving of safe, sanitary housing. Their incomes may have been low—the average public housing resident’s income amounted to 60 percent of the national median—but they met the agencies’ behavioral criteria.<sup>141</sup> Yet housing built in this period would not replicate HACA’s achievements in its initial experiments. In 1968, new federal legislation altered public housing officials’ recruitment practices and their visions for what the projects could do for the residents. In this new era, public housing gained its most notorious reputation as a programmatic disaster whose poor design cultivated increasingly-dangerous compounds of concentrated poverty and crime.

Some scholars argue that the projects’ decline resulted from decreasing income

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<sup>140</sup> Housing Authority of the City of Austin, *Annual Report for 1950* (Austin, TX: Housing Authority of the City of Austin, 1950), 4.

<sup>141</sup> The USHA was re-designated as the Public Housing Administration in February 1942. It was later consolidated with other agencies into the Housing and Home Finance Agency in July 1947. In 1965, the Housing and Urban Development Act led to the creation of the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) as the agency overseeing public housing; Lawrence J. Vale, *Purging the Poorest: Public Housing and the Design Politics of Twice-Cleared Communities* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 16.

targets and rent caps, put in place by the 1969 Brooke Amendment to the Fair Housing Act of 1968. Under the Brooke Amendment, housing authorities received far fewer funds from rent and thus could not maintain their projects or their social programs, hallmarks of public housing's rehabilitative aims. Public housing's original targeted tenants, middle-class-aspiring working-class families, were driven away by the projects' worsening conditions.<sup>142</sup> Housing authorities, desperate to fill growing vacancies, began tenanting those willing to live in these spaces: "the least advantaged and most economically desperate urban dwellers."<sup>143</sup> Subsequently, the program became known as warehouses for America's poorest citizens.

Austin's public housing history reflected national trends of decline. In 1971, journalist Monica Reeves compared HACA's operations to other troubled public housing programs. She alluded to clear differences between projects constructed in the first phase of Austin's public housing experiment to those built after 1950. According to Reeves, the city's earlier complexes were "alive and well."<sup>144</sup> Austin's public housing program stood out from those in other major cities, as the local housing authority had avoided bankruptcy and its first buildings were in good shape despite their age. Yet Reeves stated that Austin's later projects, particularly Booker T. Washington Terrace, had "not aged gracefully."<sup>145</sup> Surrounded by an "unlandscaped, scraggly acreage," the newer units

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<sup>142</sup> Howard Husock, "How Brooke Helped Destroy Public Housing," *Forbes*, January 8, 2015, accessed March 9, 2017, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/howardhusock/2015/01/08/how-senator-brooke-helped-destroy-public-housing/#638a8f203fc3>.

<sup>143</sup> Vale, *Purging the Poorest*, 17.

<sup>144</sup> Monica Reeves, "Austin Public Housing Alive and Well," *Austin Citizen*, November 11, 1971, Housing Projects, Austin History Center, Box AF-H4510, Folder 1.

<sup>145</sup> Reeves, "Austin Public Housing Alive and Well."

looked “far older than their years,” with many units in need of repair.<sup>146</sup> Reeves added that housing authority social workers reported that tenants did not like living at Booker T. Washington. “It is an unstable environment racked by crime and occasional violence, [with] a number of structural problems [that] tend to reinforce the generally depressing air of the project.”<sup>147</sup> Suffering from crime, poor management, and unsafe dwellings, Booker T. Washington hardly resembled the upstanding public housing complexes of 1930s Austin. Residents abhorred the declining conditions. “Raising children here is hell,” one woman exclaimed in 1970.<sup>148</sup> “It is hard to take your children to church. When you come home, the driveway is blocked by police cars.”<sup>149</sup> Others characterized Austin’s largest predominantly-Black public housing complex as “frightening.”<sup>150</sup> Booker T.’s supposedly “low-income” apartments, which crawled with rats, charged as much as one hundred dollars a month for rent, “and the city manager said he couldn’t care less” about the project’s physical conditions.<sup>151</sup> Booker T.’s environment illustrated an almost complete reversal in the physical conditions and programmatic goals of Austin’s public housing.

How, in the span of thirty years, had HACA’s program moved from providing qualifying citizens with a modern, self-consciously middle-class lifestyle to relegating underprivileged African Americans to stressful and dangerous compounds? The answer is that Booker T. Washington Terrace declined largely because of HACA’s discriminatory

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<sup>146</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>148</sup> “Jurors Hear Tenants’ Woes,” *Austin Statesman*, November 19, 1970, Housing Projects, Austin History Center, Box AF-H4510, Folder 2.

<sup>149</sup> “Jurors Hear Tenants’ Woes.”

<sup>150</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.*

policies. HACA further pursued its segregationist policies and exacerbated public housing's dire situation with the planned construction of another complex targeted at maintaining racial separation and thus inequality. Project TEX1-9 would answer the city's need for more housing, keep non-white tenants from intermingling with white residents, and further solidify East Austin's role as the city's "Negro District," even in the wake of important civil rights legislation. In willingly ignoring and actively working against its Black tenants' needs, HACA failed to serve its residents during this second period of America's public housing experiment.

While HACA's neglect created inhumane living conditions in its projects, the housing authority's disregard for its tenants' welfare fostered the emergence of an effective and vocal resident activist group at Booker T. Washington Terrace. The Booker T. Washington Tenant Group, the representative body for Booker T.'s occupants, repeatedly challenged the housing authority to remedy the project and make it a safer place to live, consequently transforming the complex into a theater of struggle for decent accommodations. When HACA planned to expand its discriminatory operations with Project TEX1-9, resident activists adopted new, more public tactics in their quest to stop the construction of additional segregated public housing. Though the story of Booker T. Washington Terrace illustrates the public housing program's troublesome second phase, the project's activist tenants reveal how public housing occupants combatted complexes' decline and challenged housing authorities to once again fulfill the program's initial promise of safe, sanitary housing.

## II. Public Housing's Continued Expansion in Austin and the Construction of Booker T. Washington Terrace

Though HACA's first three projects provided some Austinites with quality shelter, the housing authority's 1950 survey found that thousands of local people continued to suffer from a postwar housing shortage. In areas near central Austin, more than 20,000 individuals lived in unsanitary and overcrowded spaces, with 4,881 substandard dwelling units and over 2,000 outdoor toilets. Reiterating the same arguments made by public housing advocates and concerned citizens in the 1930s, HACA's study showed that communicable diseases, fires, crime, and juvenile delinquency plagued the areas marked by substandard housing and again argued that the City of Austin spent a "disproportionate amount" of money and resources on these particularly blighted areas.<sup>152</sup> Austin clearly needed more quality housing for low-income people.

HACA's study convinced the city council to intervene in East Austin once more by adopting a resolution aimed at further improving the city's housing conditions. The city's new housing resolution, approved on April 27, 1950, received the support of influential citizen groups that had advocated for HACA's first projects in 1938. Organizations such as the Austin League of Women Voters and the Austin Junior Chamber of Commerce commended the council's "foresight in making Austin an even finer place in which to live."<sup>153</sup> As part of Austin's new housing policy, the city council proposed a contract with HACA to build more complexes. Both parties signed this

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<sup>152</sup> Housing Authority of the City of Austin, *Annual Report for 1950*, 4, 6.

<sup>153</sup> City Council of Austin, Texas, "Minutes of the City Council, Regular Meeting," May 4, 1950: 507, accessed January 11, 2017, <http://www.austintexas.gov/edims/document.cfm?id=88541>.

Cooperation Agreement on May 5, 1950, hence formalizing the growth of Austin's public housing program and giving HACA the freedom to construct 520 additional units.<sup>154</sup>

Prospects for more quality public housing seemed good.

Not all Austinites supported public housing's expansion. Private citizens urged the council to consider other strategies for housing the poor. At one meeting in May 1950, Austinite Fred Adams offered a private plan as an alternative to federally-funded housing. Adams proposed that private citizens buy land, build houses, and sell them to qualifying individuals who would then pay the property owners with the goal of eventually owning these rented homes.<sup>155</sup> Adams also suggested that slum-dwellers could inhabit vacant dwellings owned by The University of Texas (UT).<sup>156</sup> Others criticized public housing more viciously. Local resident Fred Morse derided public housing as a "socialistic program" that would hurt Austin's reputation as an "example city."<sup>157</sup> While slum clearance would benefit the city's overall wellbeing, Morse conceded, he lamented federal interference in local matters. Moreover, he found the program unnecessary "with world conditions as they are" and the need for large defense expenditures dedicated towards the Korean War.<sup>158</sup> Financial interests rather than ideological disagreements

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<sup>154</sup> City Council Minutes, May 4, 1950, 507.

<sup>155</sup> Adams's proposal resembled organized contract buyer programs seen elsewhere at this time, such as those in Chicago. Historian Beryl Sanders explores the downsides of this discriminatory housing program in *Family Properties: How the Struggle Over Race and Real Estate Transformed Chicago and Urban America* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2009).

<sup>156</sup> City Council Minutes, May 4, 1950, 507.

<sup>157</sup> City Council of Austin, Texas, "Minutes of the City Council, Regular Meeting," April 27, 1950: 501, accessed January 11, 2017, <http://www.austintexas.gov/edims/document.cfm?id=88540>.

<sup>158</sup> City Council of Austin, Texas, "Minutes of the City Council, Regular Meeting," November 9, 1950: 939, accessed January 11, 2017, <http://www.austintexas.gov/edims/document.cfm?id=88474>.

drove other protesters such as W.E. Biggs, President of the Austin Home Builders' Association, who disapproved of the program because of its detrimental effects on private home-building and rising construction material costs. W.H. Bullard of the First Austin Investment Corporation echoed this concern, reporting that the program was wiping out his group's building supplies and thus delaying private construction.<sup>159</sup> Though the need for new housing was clear, the opposition to publicly subsidized housing construction remained strong.

Local apprehension did not prevent HACA's construction of "the biggest government housing program ever planned" in Austin.<sup>160</sup> In June 1951, HACA announced the receipt of over three million dollars, which funded the creation of two additional public complexes. These projects provided the 520 units outlined in the 1950 Cooperation Agreement and increased the city's total public housing units to 850. Along with a complex for whites in South Austin and a sixty-unit addition to the Mexican-American Santa Rita Courts, HACA planned to develop another enormous project for African Americans in "far East Austin."<sup>161</sup> HACA situated these three hundred units, divided among fifty-two two-story buildings, on a tract of land bordered by Rosewood Avenue, Thompson Street, and Webberville Road, just a few blocks farther east from the city's other public housing project for Black residents, Rosewood Courts.<sup>162</sup> By the end of 1952, HACA began accepting applications for the new Booker T. Washington Terrace

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<sup>159</sup> City Council Minutes, November 9, 1950, 939; City Council Minutes, April 27, 1950, 502.

<sup>160</sup> "Contracts Let for 3,218,000 Public Housing Project Here," *Austin Statesman*, June 24, 1951, accessed January 11, 2017, <https://www.austinlibrary.com:8443/login?url=http://www.austinlibrary.com:2400/docview/1609656791?accountid=7451>.

<sup>161</sup> "Contracts Let for 3,218,000 Public Housing Project Here."

<sup>162</sup> *Ibid.*

in anticipation for its opening in January 1953.<sup>163</sup> Demand for such housing was high. The city's entire 850-unit supply was completely occupied by 1954.<sup>164</sup>

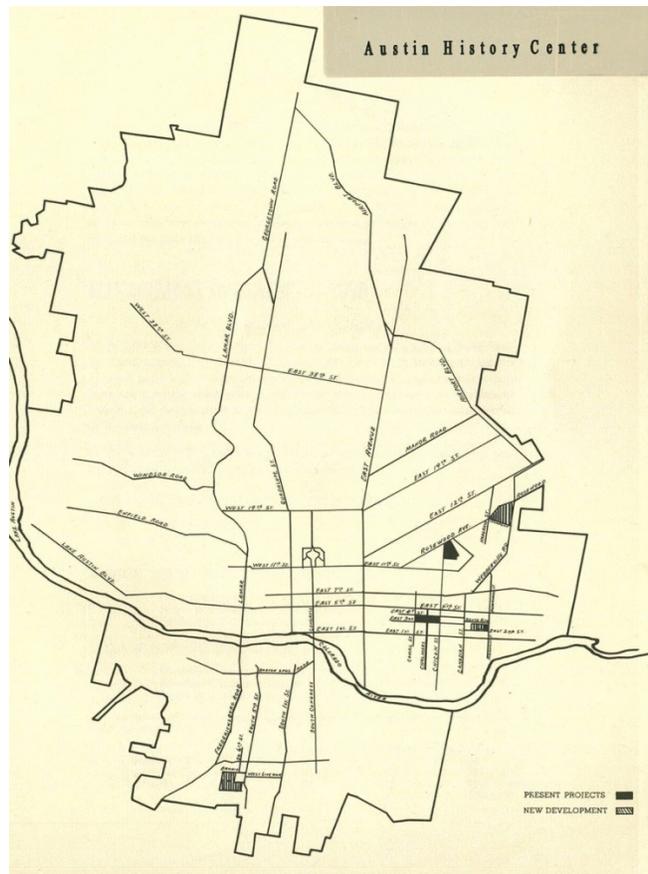


Figure 6: Map of public housing projects, 1950. The map shows both existing and planned public housing complexes, which were almost wholly located in East Austin. The planned location of Booker T. Washington Terrace is seen along the eastern half of Rosewood Avenue. Courtesy of The Housing Authority of the City of Austin's 1950 Annual Report, Austin History Center, Austin Public Library.

Unlike HACA's early publicity of Rosewood Courts and its sister projects, journalists covering Booker T.'s construction primarily focused on the project's massive size. Architecturally, Booker T. resembled Rosewood Courts, with its brick buildings,

<sup>163</sup> "Negro Housing Nearly Ready," *Austin Statesman*, November 23, 1952, accessed January 11, 2017, <https://www.austinlibrary.com:8443/login?url=http://www.austinlibrary.com:2400/docview/1609928656?accountid=7451>.

<sup>164</sup> Housing Authority of the City of Austin, *Annual Report for 1954* (Austin, TX: Housing Authority of the City of Austin, 1954), 1.

metal windows, and minimalist design. Despite these shared design elements, Booker T. significantly differed from Rosewood in its lack of quality building materials, evidenced by its cheap plywood interior walls, as well as its absence of landscaping. Aside from its fifty-two buildings and a maintenance and administration building, Booker T. had “nothing but paved streets” the *Austin Statesman* reported.<sup>165</sup> Booker T. did not seek to mimic the appearance of private yards, recreational spaces, and park-like atmosphere seen at Rosewood.

Like Rosewood, the new complex continued to offer limited community activities and resources geared towards transforming residents into skilled, self-sufficient citizens. Most notably, Booker T. organized daycare services for its resident families. Run by the Austin Public Schools, the facility served as a nursery for nine months of the year and hosted sewing, budgeting, cooking, and homemaking classes for the other three months. Any other recreational activities, sponsored by organizations such as the Austin Recreation Department and the YWCA (Young Women’s Christian Association), operated solely at HACA’s other projects.<sup>166</sup> HACA suggested that these “well-planned programs” benefitted the “entire section” of the city, meaning the hundreds of families that constituted East Austin’s public housing population.<sup>167</sup>

For the most part, though, Booker T. lacked the kinds of recreational space and social services found elsewhere. Tenants, as a result, had to travel outside of the project to experience wholesome activities already readily provided to Austin’s other public

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<sup>165</sup> “About Ready.” *Austin Statesman*, November 30, 1952, accessed January 11, 2017, <https://www.austinlibrary.com:8443/login?url=http://www.austinlibrary.com:2400/docview/1609930943?accountid=7451>.

<sup>166</sup> Such activities were primarily offered at Chalmers Courts and Rosewood Courts.

<sup>167</sup> Housing Authority of the City of Austin, *Annual Report for 1954*, 3.

housing residents. Booker T.'s unembellished architecture, lack of verdant outdoor space, and limited social resources proved unwelcoming to families and their young children and curtailed its African-American residents' quest for the middle-class lifestyle actively encouraged at HACA's other complexes. The project's austere environment signaled a change, whether conscious or not, in the housing authority's treatment of its Black tenants. HACA's focus changed from cultivating pleasant dwellings that evoked notions of private homeownership to erecting massive compounds that firmly sequestered a large number of African-American families in East Austin, assuring the area's continued function as the city's "Negro District" for decades to come.<sup>168</sup>

### III. Decades of Problems and Discrimination at Booker T. Washington Terrace

Despite HACA's promises of safe, modern dwellings, Austin's new African-American public housing complex encountered building issues within the first two years of its operation. In November 1954, HACA was forced to pay thousands of dollars for "emergency" repairs on twenty-one units' faulty foundations.<sup>169</sup> As explained by HACA's executive-secretary, W.W. Steward, the buildings' foundation piers sunk deep into the site's Bentonite clay, the "most treacherous of foundation soil."<sup>170</sup> Engineers seemingly took precautions to avoid problems imposed by the clay's excessive moisture, but the interventions failed to work. The site's clay contracted and cracked the buildings'

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<sup>168</sup> The 1928 Koch and Fowler Plan, discussed in Chapter Two, established the city's "Negro District" in East Austin.

<sup>169</sup> "Faulty Foundations Hit Housing Project," *Austin Statesman*, November 15, 1954, accessed January 11, 2017, <https://www.austinlibrary.com:8443/login?url=http://www.austinlibrary.com:2400/docview/1559175014?accountid=7451>.

<sup>170</sup> "Foundation of Housing Units Cracks: 'Error' Admitted on Project Here," *Austin Statesman*, November 12, 1954, accessed January 11, 2017, <https://www.austinlibrary.com:8443/login?url=http://www.austinlibrary.com:2400/docview/1559173983?accountid=7451>.

masonry. Steward described the original foundation work as an “error in professional judgment” but blamed no one for the mistake, instead excusing it as “just one of those bad breaks you get sometime in construction.”<sup>171</sup> As Steward suggested, professional architects and engineers should have recognized and properly dealt with the limitations posed by the site’s poor environment. Arguably, HACA made a mistake in constructing these massive buildings on such problematic, moisture-laden soil, as the environment clearly jeopardized the creation of safe, sturdy structures. HACA, however, saw this tract of land, situated within the “Negro District,” as serving the City of Austin’s segregationist planning policy and HACA’s goal of housing greater numbers of Austin’s eligible poor. Ultimately, this foundation problem signaled the beginning of Booker T. Washington Terrace’s troubled history, foreshadowing greater problems in the years to come.

Booker T. deteriorated significantly within a decade. In contrast to the celebrations of Rosewood Courts’ surroundings and social programs, by the late 1960s and early 1970s, the public focused on Booker T.’s inferior conditions, with numerous newspaper articles exposing the dangerous atmosphere that permeated daily life in what local people thought of as “the ghetto.”<sup>172</sup> Most notably, Booker T. suffered from an extraordinary number of fires during a twenty-year period, with 106 fires reported between 1952 and 1972.<sup>173</sup> Sadly, some fires claimed the lives of some of the complex’s

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<sup>171</sup> “Faulty Foundations Hit Housing Project;” “Foundation of Housing Units Cracks: ‘Error’ Admitted on Project Here.”

<sup>172</sup> Booker T. Washington Terrace was commonly referred to as “the ghetto” during this time period; Dave Mayes, “Renovation on at Booker T.: Dangerous ‘Fire Trap’ Getting Face-Lifting Safety Job,” *Austin Statesman*, September 3, 1972, Housing Projects, Austin History Center, Box AF-H4510, Folder 2.

<sup>173</sup> Mayes, “Renovation on at Booker T.”

youngest residents. In 1966, a two-month-old child suffocated from one blaze's overwhelming smoke as it ripped through a second-story apartment.<sup>174</sup> Just a few years later, another two-month-old perished in a fire at the project. Luckily, teenage neighbors heard the commotion and saved the lives of three other toddlers in the burning apartment, all of whom had been left alone while the infant's mother made a phone call at a nearby filling station.<sup>175</sup> Children's match games allegedly caused some of these fires, but the project's cheap design and hazardous materials ensured the flames' quick devastation. Austin Fire Chief Brady Pool described the apartments as "firetraps, just firetraps, I don't know how many deaths I've seen in these places."<sup>176</sup> "They all die up there," he said.<sup>177</sup> Though the Austin Fire Department first characterized Booker T. as having "severe safety hazards" in 1957, it took twelve years, dozens of fires, and a number of deaths before HACA was forced to better fireproof the project.<sup>178</sup>

When Booker T.'s tenants realized that HACA would not maintain the complex, they sought to draw public attention to their plight. In August 1969, Booker T.'s tenant group pushed the Board of Directors of the non-profit agency Human Opportunities Corporation (HOC) to urge HACA's overhaul of Booker T.'s dangerous fire-prone conditions, primarily through replacing units' flammable plywood walls with

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<sup>174</sup> Lloyd Matthews, "Suffocates: Apartment Fire Takes Tot's Life," *Austin Statesman*, February 26, 1966, accessed January 11, 2017, <https://www.austinlibrary.com:8443/login?url=http://www.austinlibrary.com:2400/docview/1516015734?accountid=7451>.

<sup>175</sup> "Fire Cause at Project Unknown," *Austin Statesman*, October 20, 1969, accessed January 11, 2017, <https://www.austinlibrary.com:8443/login?url=http://www.austinlibrary.com:2400/docview/1514918432?accountid=7451>.

<sup>176</sup> "Fire Cause at Project Unknown."

<sup>177</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>178</sup> *Ibid.*

sheetrock.<sup>179</sup> HACA responded by providing fire extinguishers in communal areas and establishing a schedule of fire inspections, a weak showing for what HACA Chairman William C. Petri described as the housing authority's commitment to do "anything humanly possible" to make Booker T. safer.<sup>180</sup> These remedies were not enough. A water heater caused another pre-dawn fire in 1971, which swiftly engulfed one apartment's rickety plywood walls and forced the dwelling's inhabitants to leap out of a window to escape the blaze.<sup>181</sup> When questioned about Booker T.'s frequent fires, Austin Fire Marshall L.E. Priest confirmed that the conditions, number of fires, and rate of death were "many, many times worse" than in other city housing complexes.<sup>182</sup> Despite these occurrences and promises to conduct safety checks, the City of Austin neglected to make regular inspections at any of the public housing complexes, ostensibly because officials believed the government properties were outside of their jurisdiction.<sup>183</sup>

In 1971, HACA received a \$3.8 million HUD grant dedicated to modernizing a number of Austin's public housing projects, including Booker T.<sup>184</sup> The housing

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<sup>179</sup> The HOC, incorporated in 1964, implemented the Johnson administration's Community Action Programs in Austin and Travis County. The agency focused on eradicating and preventing the further spread of poverty, particularly in East Austin. The HOC remained independent from the city government until 1972. See "Human Opportunity Corporation Reunion Records," Austin History Center, Austin Public Library, Austin, Texas; "2 Projects' Fire Hazard End Urged," *Austin Statesman*, August 22, 1969, accessed January 11, 2017, <https://www.austinlibrary.com:8443/login?url=http://www.austinlibrary.com:2400/docview/1515972671?accountid=7451>.

<sup>180</sup> "Fire Cause at Project Unknown."

<sup>181</sup> Jay Brakefield, "5 Leap to Safety in Apartment Fire," *Austin Statesman*, March 11, 1971, accessed January 21, 2017, <https://www.austinlibrary.com:8443/login?url=http://www.austinlibrary.com:2400/docview/1514487504?accountid=7451>.

<sup>182</sup> Mayes, "Renovation on at Booker T."

<sup>183</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>184</sup> "Housing Grant Won by Austin," *Austin Statesman*, March 11, 1971, accessed January 21, 2017, <https://www.austinlibrary.com:8443/login?url=http://www.austinlibrary.com:2400/docview/1514327137?accountid=7451>.

authority used these funds for Booker T.'s 1972 renovation with the hope that these much-needed physical changes would ultimately end the complex's tragic number of fires and deaths. Residents voted to decide which renovations would be performed, and they prioritized sheetrocking the project's interior plywood walls. Sheetrock was a substantial safety improvement over plywood walls, whose incendiary qualities Fire Marshall Priest described as "the same as pouring kerosene on a fire."<sup>185</sup> In addition to the inflammable sheetrock, HACA covered stairways with rubberized matting, mounted fire-retardant asbestos tile panels, installed new appliances and heaters, and added other safety measures, including new locks and back porch lights. Relieved tenants greatly appreciated these much-needed changes. Ora Canady, a resident who had lived at Booker T. since its opening in 1953, described the updated complex as a "much nicer place to live now... I feel safer here, too."<sup>186</sup> Residents' self-advocacy and determination to create public awareness of Booker T.'s hazardous surroundings worked in pressuring HACA to consult with its tenants and finally create more humane living conditions.

Despite the widespread knowledge of plywood's dangerous qualities, HACA continued to use the material at the insistence of the HHFA to save money. Though HACA reportedly wanted to construct sturdy masonry walls to match those in its other complexes, the federal agency's tight budget forced Austin's housing authority to cut costs. Strangely, according to Marshall W. Amis, regional director of Fort Worth's housing authority in the 1950s, HACA chose to use plywood rather than plasterboard, which was both cheaper and safer.<sup>187</sup> HACA's shoddy plywood interior walls signified a

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<sup>185</sup> Mayes, "Renovation on at Booker T."

<sup>186</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>187</sup> *Ibid.*

shift in the housing authority's outlook and treatment of its residents.

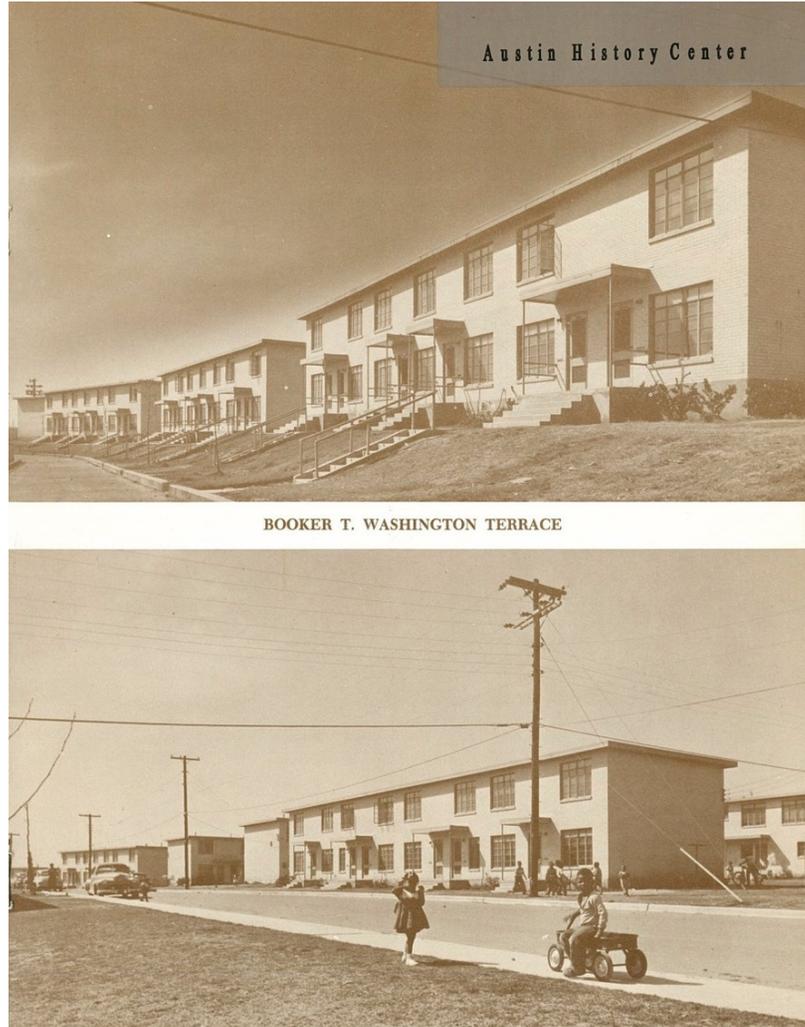


Figure 7: Booker T. Washington Terrace, 1954. Courtesy of The Housing Authority of the City of Austin's 1954 Annual Report, Austin History Center, Austin Public Library.

Booker T.'s massive size, a departure from HACA's early courts, also indicated a new direction in the authority's approach to housing the city's working poor. With this large project, HACA sought to address the city's desperate need for quality low-income housing illustrated in the authority's 1950 housing survey. Yet HACA's funding could only go so far, especially when building separate housing complexes for three different races. Inevitably, the city's critical housing demands, coupled with HACA's segregationist policies, outweighed the emphasis on the suburban-like atmospheres

carefully cultivated in the housing authority's three original projects. Consequently, HACA willingly sacrificed its African-American tenants' comfort, safety, and lives in its quest to expand its operations and serve as a nationally-recognized model for large-scale low-income housing.

HACA's disregard for Booker T.'s residents extended beyond hazardous housing and infrequent safety inspections. The complex's management also failed to respond adequately to occupants' needs and complaints. One member of the Booker T. Washington Tenant Group accused the management of ambivalence and even animosity towards protecting residents. "If we report violations of the law, we are threatened" by the project's supervisors, the individual reported.<sup>188</sup> Booker T.'s manager, Lloyd Curley, seemed to harbor resentment towards the African-American residents and blamed the project's inferior surroundings on the tenants themselves. Curley argued that because occupants were unfamiliar with such luxuries as modern plumbing, "they continue[d] to live just like they lived before in some other place," leading to units' disrepair.<sup>189</sup> Austin's City Manager Lynn Andrews echoed Curley's bigoted assumptions. He reportedly declared that he "couldn't care less whether the conditions out there [at Booker T.] are good, bad, or indifferent. They're no concern of mine."<sup>190</sup> He later denied this statement after serious outcry from public housing residents and the city at large. Together, HACA and the City of Austin's unconcern for Booker T. further harmed residents' physical and psychological wellbeing, as such disdain signaled that the housing authority did not believe that African-American tenants deserved or appreciated such

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<sup>188</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>189</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>190</sup> "Housing Project Statement Denied by City Manager," *Austin Statesman*, October 30, 1970, Housing Projects, Austin History Center, Box AF-H4510, Folder 2.

state-sponsored assistance.

While inhabiting physically dangerous apartments ignored by its management, Booker T.'s occupants "lived in terror" next to the complex's vacant buildings, then widely known as hotspots for illicit sex and drug use.<sup>191</sup> Vacant units, poorly-lit streets, and blind alleyways fostered criminal attacks and frequent battles with the police.<sup>192</sup> In a seven-month period in 1970, Booker T. tenants made 473 calls to the Austin Police Department, reporting numerous offenses of burglary, theft, assault, vandalism, and even rape and murder.<sup>193</sup> Residents combatted the complex's dangerous and stressful environment on a daily basis, with the residents of three hundred units calling the police on average more than two times a day.

According to Mrs. Ruby Melrose, President of the Booker T. Washington Tenant Group in the early 1970s, violence and crime frequently discouraged ambulances or policemen from entering the project. Melrose recalled one disturbance on July 17, 1970, when officers failed to intervene as "100 or more kids [were] rebelling and acting like fools."<sup>194</sup> According to Melrose, "the whole street was terrorized" as delinquents threw rocks at police cars.<sup>195</sup> HOC Board President LaSalle Barnett accused local police, HACA, and even the *Austin Statesman* of suppressing reports of the outburst, which he

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<sup>191</sup> "Jurors Hear Tenants' Woes."

<sup>192</sup> Dan West, "Terror Reigns, Tenants Say," *Austin Statesman*, October 28, 1970, Housing Projects, Austin History Center, Box AF-H4510, Folder 2.

<sup>193</sup> "Austin Police Deny Charge of 'Cop Out' in Disturbance," *Austin Statesman*, July 25, 1970, accessed January 21, 2017, <https://www.austinlibrary.com:8443/login?url=http://www.austinlibrary.com:2400/docview/1514830229?accountid=7451>.

<sup>194</sup> "Austin Police Deny Charge of 'Cop Out' in Disturbance."

<sup>195</sup> Mike Cox, "Booker Housing: Police Reveal Their Concern," *Austin Statesman*, July 24, 1970, accessed January 11, 2017, <https://www.austinlibrary.com:8443/login?url=http://www.austinlibrary.com:2400/docview/1514645152?accountid=7451>.

labeled a “riot.”<sup>196</sup> Austin police and City Manager Lynn Andrew responded by downplaying both the disturbance’s severity and its alleged cover-up. Tenants suggested HACA was to blame for these instances in which teenagers resorted to playing “hide-and-seek game[s] with policemen and firemen,” as the housing authority failed to provide quality recreational facilities for the complex’s young people.<sup>197</sup>

Beyond disorderly behavior, citizens reported several planned attacks on firemen and police officers with the intent to kill or injure them.<sup>198</sup> Certain hostile individuals repeatedly battered public safety officials with rocks, Molotov cocktails, and sometimes guns, forcing policemen and firefighters “to fight their way” into Booker T.<sup>199</sup> Melrose remembered one particular gun fight as sounding “like a battlefield,” with Molotov cocktail bombs thrown at the project’s main office and shots fired at firemen trying to assist at the scene.<sup>200</sup> Other residents criticized the Austin police, suggesting that the officers did not take the inhabitants’ reports for help seriously. One tenant described the police’s response as callous and unhelpful. “When you call them they bang at the door real hard and shout, ‘What the hell do you want,’” he recalled.<sup>201</sup> Austin Police Chief Bob Miles contended that the complex’s escalating violence had driven his men to pay greater attention to the project and its occupants. Contradicting the residents’ claims, Miles assured the public that “there is no reluctance on the part of the men to answer a call.”<sup>202</sup> Nonetheless, one policeman described his experiences with Booker T. as “tense as hell. It

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<sup>196</sup> Cox, “Booker Housing: Police Reveal Their Concern.”

<sup>197</sup> “Jurors Hear Tenants’ Woes.”

<sup>198</sup> “Austin Police Deny Charge of ‘Cop Out’ in Disturbance.”

<sup>199</sup> “Jurors Hear Tenants’ Woes.”

<sup>200</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>201</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>202</sup> Liz Bass, “In Housing Projects Violence Diminishes,” *The Daily Texan*, February 4, 1971, Housing Projects, Austin History Center, Box AF-H4510, Folder 2.

gets rough over there, damn rough.”<sup>203</sup> Though police and firemen felt targeted by a portion of Booker T.’s tenants, the project’s volatile atmosphere and strained relations with public safety officials arose from HACA and the City of Austin’s continued neglect and discrimination, as a number individuals turned to violence to express frustration with their substandard living conditions and limited economic opportunities.<sup>204</sup>

Overall, Booker T.’s tenants did not participate in or support these outbursts. Instead, residents tried to provide police with information about violent incidents to end the terror and used other organizational avenues, like the project’s tenant group, to communicate their dissatisfaction. “In a way,” Melrose said, “we can’t blame the police” for their hesitation in dealing with Booker T.<sup>205</sup> “We’re all scared when these things break out, but someone has to stop it.”<sup>206</sup> In working with the police and other municipal bodies, Booker T.’s tenants strove to draw attention to their plight and thus effect much-needed change in improving their homes’ physical surroundings.

Both tenants and police regularly blamed young people for the project’s crime, vandalism, and other troubles. In doing so, they reflected the nation’s concern regarding

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<sup>203</sup> Cox, “Booker Housing: Police Reveal Their Concern.”

<sup>204</sup> A full discussion of riot behavior and terminology is beyond the scope of this thesis, but there is an ongoing historiographical debate regarding definitions and riots in American urban areas. See Michael B. Katz, *Why Don’t American Cities Burn?* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011) and Joshua Clover, *Riot. Strike. Riot.: The New Era of Uprisings* (London: Verso, 2016).

<sup>205</sup> Rick Fish, “Project’s Law, Order City Job, Mayor Says,” *Austin Statesman*, October 28, 1970, accessed January 11, 2017, <https://www.austinlibrary.com:8443/login?url=http://www.austinlibrary.com:2400/docview/1514689585?accountid=7451>.

<sup>206</sup> Fish, “Project’s Law, Order City Job, Mayor Says,”

“a new brand of [angry] Negro American youth” in urban slums at the time.<sup>207</sup> HACA Commissioner Forest Pearson portrayed the complex’s troublemakers as “organized, young, bored, and explosive.”<sup>208</sup> The city’s police echoed this sentiment, attributing Booker T.’s dangerous situation to “youngsters who have nothing to do.”<sup>209</sup> Even residents blamed the project’s youth, with one man cursing the havoc wreaked by “damn kids, toting guns and throwing firebombs.”<sup>210</sup> Along with burglarizing cars and causing other chaos, youths disrupted Booker T. Washington Tenant Group meetings. At one October 1969 meeting focused on the project’s numerous fires, one young man interrupted the proceedings by shouting Black Power sentiments and urging residents to “rise up” and stop “sit[ting] around and listen[ing] to stupid... pigs and wait[ing] for them” to fix Booker T.’s problems.<sup>211</sup> While the tenant group disapproved of his inflammatory remarks, its chairman, Gladys Hennington, sympathized with his struggles, as both parties were “fight[ing] for what [they] want[ed].”<sup>212</sup> “I’m just as upset as you,” she said to the group, “but I couldn’t throw that young man out.”<sup>213</sup> Tenants were not surprised by the man’s remarks, but some still left the meeting because of “fear of

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<sup>207</sup> National debate over this changing mood among young Blacks arose after the July 1967 race riots that took place across the country. Scott Austin, “‘Assertive, Insistent, Demanding, Volatile’: New Breed of Negroes Springs Up in America’s Slums,” *Austin Statesman*, August 24, 1967, accessed May 5, 2017, <https://www.austinlibrary.com:8443/login?url=http://www.austinlibrary.com:2400/docview/1515942398?accountid=7451>.

<sup>208</sup> Fish, “Project’s Law, Order City Job, Mayor Says.”

<sup>209</sup> Cox, “Booker Housing: Police Reveal Their Concern.”

<sup>210</sup> West, “Terror Reigns, Tenants Say.”

<sup>211</sup> John Bryant, “Youth Disrupts Parley of Eastside Residents,” *Austin Statesman*, October 22, 1969, accessed May 5, 2017, <https://www.austinlibrary.com:8443/login?url=http://www.austinlibrary.com:2400/docview/1515140257?accountid=7451>.

<sup>212</sup> Bryant, “Youth Disrupts Parley of Eastside Residents.”

<sup>213</sup> *Ibid.*

violence” associated with the Black militant group.<sup>214</sup> The contrast in rhetoric between the Booker T. Washington Tenant Group and members of Austin’s Black Power Movement reveals how generational differences inflected political clashes within the local Black community, as distinct activist groups gravitated towards very different strategies in improving public housing and East Austin’s conditions as a whole. Some young Black Austinites declared that total control of Black communities would be the only way to achieve peace and be free from discrimination. On the other hand, Booker T.’s (typically older) residents advocated using established channels and working with the housing authority and the City of Austin to effect necessary, permanent change.

Even members of East Austin’s young Black generation were split in this intraracial conflict. Not all young people participated in this violence or advocated for radical change, suggesting the limitations of blaming Booker T.’s problems on youth alone. One nineteen-year-old resident, who wished to steer clear of Booker T.’s troubles and uprisings, remarked that “all we can do is duck the bullets and put out the fires ourselves.”<sup>215</sup> This tenant’s sentiments suggest that not all youth were drawn to the Black Power Movement’s calls to action and thus highlights friction between members of the same age group. Different residents and activists had their own ideas for fixing Booker T. and bettering Black Austinites’ lives.

Austin’s projects, of course, were not alone in these tensions raised by generational and political differences. Some historians have focused on the role of youth, in itself, as a problem for those seeking an orderly community. As historian D. Bradford Hunt has contended, the Chicago Housing Authority brought extraordinary numbers of

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<sup>214</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>215</sup> Fish, “Project’s Law, Order City Job, Mayor Says.”

young people into the city's public housing units. Hunt argues that this unparalleled concentration of young people led to the vandalizing of property and the creation of a fear-filled atmosphere, thwarting attempts by adult tenants, housing authorities, and law enforcement to ameliorate troubled complexes' patterns of crime, violence, and poor living conditions.<sup>216</sup> The CHA's efforts to bring order through social programs were overwhelmed by the scale of the problem, made worse by the density of young people in the community. Though HACA's early public housing operations had also offered social programs to give young residents constructive activities, HACA notably did not provide recreational facilities at Booker T. It would be difficult not to conclude that this lack of programming only made matters worse at Booker T.

For many housing authorities, high-density designs added to the intensity of delinquency and disrepair. Hunt ties the destructive powers of the Chicago Housing Authority's young residents to the complexes' architecture, contending that if residents lived in "low-rise, low-density row-house communities" rather than high-rises, they would have been better equipped to combat the social problems brought about by public housing's discriminatory system.<sup>217</sup> The case of Booker T., however, illustrates that its problems were not determined solely by its architectural design. Though Austin's most populated public housing project, Booker T.'s layout consisted of dozens of low-rise

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<sup>216</sup> D. Bradford Hunt, *Blueprint for a Disaster: The Unraveling of Chicago Public Housing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 12.

<sup>217</sup> Hunt, *Blueprint for a Disaster*, 180.

apartment homes, not high-rises.<sup>218</sup> Yet the complex still suffered from deaths, violence, fires, and tense police relationships—many of the same problems plaguing many of the nation’s high-rise projects in this period.

Booker T.’s story complicates the established narrative of public housing in the 1960s and 1970s. Historians such as Oscar Newman have focused on housing authorities’ predilection for high-rise construction. Newman’s *Defensible Space* assigns public housing’s troubles directly to the proliferation of high-rise developments, labeling the “apartment tower... [as] the real and final villain” in causing public housing’s alarming number of deaths and crimes.<sup>219</sup> Yet other scholars such as Fritz Umbach and Alexander Gerould challenge Newman’s broad generalizations. As they point out, later surveys showed that population numbers and demographics, rather than the complexes’ architecture, affected projects’ crime statistics.<sup>220</sup>

In Austin, neither architectural design nor demographics, alone, determined the history of the public housing complexes. Austin’s history shows that public housing policies, as they affected social programs and quality of construction, also helped cause

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<sup>218</sup> Though not high-rises, Booker T.’s buildings were much more densely populated than those at Rosewood Courts. Like in Chicago’s high-rise buildings, Booker T.’s unsupervised and shared public spaces could have contributed to the project’s violent atmosphere. Booker T.’s troubles suggest that HACA was ill-equipped to manage such a high-density complex. However, HACA did successfully operate a 164-unit high-rise during this period. Lakeside Apartments, built in 1967, served qualifying white senior citizens and did not experience such alarming maintenance and safety issues. This juxtaposition illustrates that HACA could handle high-density operations, but each project’s racial character determined how, and if, the housing authority responded to any problems.

<sup>219</sup> Oscar Newman, *Defensible Space: Crime Prevention through Urban Design* (New York: Macmillian Press, 1972): 25.

<sup>220</sup> Fritz Umbach and Alexander Gerould, “Myth #3 Public Housing Breeds Crime,” in *Public Housing Myths*, ed. Nicholas Dagen Bloom, Fritz Umbach, and Lawrence J. Vale (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2015), 90.

Booker T.'s problems. In addition, as the 1969 Brooke Amendment to the Housing Act forced HUD to change its policies, housing authorities' tenants became poorer and possessed little economic ability to move out of public housing.<sup>221</sup> HACA Executive Director George R. Brooking acknowledged the Brooke Amendment's debilitating effects. "Eventually," he said, "projects will have to seek the lowest level. No one but welfare recipients will live in them."<sup>222</sup> Nonetheless, despite its important role in public housing's decline, the Brooke Amendment did not singlehandedly cause Booker T.'s plight. The project's troubles began years before the amendment's passage. HACA operated in a city that had a long-established tradition of segregation and racial discrimination, a practice formalized in the 1928 Koch and Fowler Plan that relegated African Americans to housing in East Austin's "Negro District." HACA was intent on preserving racial segregation in its projects, even if it disserved the very people the housing authority was trying to assist.

#### IV. How Residents Combated HACA's Discrimination

Instances of death, crime, and violence reveal the housing authority's failure to protect and provide safe housing for those African Americans living in Booker T. and throughout Austin's public housing. While many local governments and agencies intentionally or unintentionally preserved—and to some extent encouraged—housing inequality, the federal government did attempt to intervene in discriminatory housing patterns with a series of laws in the 1960s. First, Title VI of the 1964 Civil Rights Act outlawed racial discrimination in federally-funded programs and projects, punishing

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<sup>221</sup> The average income of public housing occupants fell to 30 percent of the national median by 1975; Vale, *Purging the Poorest*, 17.

<sup>222</sup> Reeves, "Austin Public Housing Alive and Well."

violating agencies by withholding financial assistance.<sup>223</sup> President Johnson expanded this legal assault on housing discrimination by signing the Fair Housing Act into law on April 11, 1968. Also known as Title VIII of the 1968 Civil Rights Act, the new law banned discrimination on the basis of race, sex, religion, or national origin in all matters relating to housing. Yet Title VIII effected only nominal change in eradicating discriminatory housing practices, as the law failed to overhaul the country's languishing public housing system, which, as one HUD representative put bluntly, "was never devised to integrate."<sup>224</sup> Housing authorities regularly circumvented Title VIII's provisions, the complexity of which made it difficult to enforce and regulate. Legal analysis of Title VIII shortly after its passage outlined the law's failure to block housing discriminatory tactics exploited by local housing authorities, such as building codes and zoning laws. Moreover, Title VIII stripped HUD of any kind of administrative power to enforce the law, leaving the agency able to only offer informal input in cases relating to housing discrimination. The weak law discouraged wronged individuals from filing official complaints and instead encouraged them to voice their grievances to other regulatory bodies or seek justice in court.<sup>225</sup>

Seeking, in part, to reestablish local control over housing, the City of Austin was in the process of adopting its own fair housing ordinance when Title VIII was enacted. The newly-formed Austin Human Relations Commission drafted the open housing

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<sup>223</sup> "The Federal Fair Housing Requirements: Title VIII of the 1968 Civil Rights Act," *Duke Law Journal* 18, no. 4 (August 1969): 749, accessed March 3, 2017, <http://scholarship.law.duke.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2213&context=dlj>.

<sup>224</sup> Anne-Marie Evans, "Judge Awaiting Further Facts in Blackshear Case," *Austin Statesman*, June 11, 1971, accessed March 17, 2016, <https://www.austinlibrary.com:8443/login?url=http://search.proquest.com/docview/1514504540?accountid=7451>.

<sup>225</sup> "The Federal Fair Housing Requirements," *Duke Law Journal*, 758, 762–763.

ordinance, which the city council adopted on May 16, 1968. Austinites bickered over the ordinance, particularly on the issue of whether the City of Austin or the federal government was responsible for enforcing the federal fair housing law. Sam Dunham, a spokesman for the Citizens for a Responsible Community group, championed the seemingly reform-minded ordinance because it would retrieve power from federal authorities. Dunham saw the locally-enforced measure as a “welcome turn of events,” sharing his belief that “the Austin community wants to meet its responsibility” in helping its fellow citizens.<sup>226</sup> Other parties, specifically the Austin Board of Realtors, the Austin Home Builders Association, and the Austin Apartment Owners Association, fought the ordinance in the name of property rights and successfully petitioned for a referendum.<sup>227</sup> In October 1968, Austin voters vetoed the measure and any local enforcement of open housing.<sup>228</sup> Title VIII’s provisions would go into effect only gradually and with no active local oversight, beginning with its application to apartment housing in 1969. Austin Mayor Harry Akin blamed the ordinance’s death on public disinterest. “If there had been half as much interest in the election as there has been in the football game, we would have had a fairer measure of the will of the people.”<sup>229</sup> But it is just as likely that the ordinance faced real opposition from those who realized how the measure would aid their non-white counterparts in accessing better housing in areas beyond the “Negro District.”

As expressed by its author, UT law professor Parker Fielder, Austin’s proposed

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<sup>226</sup> Sara Speights, “Citizens’ Group Supports Revision.” *Austin Statesman*, August 15, 1968, Housing, Austin History Center, Box AF-H4500, Folder 2.

<sup>227</sup> Ronald K. McCraw, “City Vote Scheduled for Housing Measure,” *The Daily Texan*, September 24, 1968, Housing, Austin History Center, Box AF-H4500, Folder 2.

<sup>228</sup> Less than 26 percent of Austin’s registered voters participated in this election.

<sup>229</sup> Sara Speights, “Fair Housing Proposal Rejected by City Ballot.” *Austin Statesman*, October 20, 1968, Housing, Austin History Center, Box AF-H4500, Folder 2.

fair housing ordinance wouldn't "solve all social and racial problems" but offered "a necessary beginning" in removing the city's physical vestiges of segregation.<sup>230</sup> Indeed, spatial segregation hurt non-white Austinites in numerous ways beyond restricting where they could live. In Douglas Massey and Nancy Denton's classic study of twentieth-century U.S. metropolitan segregation, *American Apartheid* (1993), the two social scientists charge that intentional racial residential segregation created the ongoing poverty experienced by minoritized people in the United States. Despite legislative efforts like the Fair Housing Act of 1968, discriminatory housing procedures sustained segregation, serving to continue Black and Latino Americans' economic and social disenfranchisement. Massey and Denton attest that poverty became magnified and concentrated in these "hyper-segregated" areas, therefore diminishing any "chances for social and economic success" for both individuals and non-white groups as a whole.<sup>231</sup> According to Massey and Denton, white prejudice steered government institutions and skewed the housing market, resulting in the creation and continued maintenance of the urban "underclass" and perpetuating "Black poverty in the United States."<sup>232</sup>

Booker T.'s occupants themselves understood this link between spatial segregation and economic disadvantages. And they sought to act on that understanding through an active tenant group that fought for better living conditions and social services. A 1968 sociological survey, conducted by a UT graduate student, strove to determine the exact causes and "intensity of [residents'] dissatisfactions" in hopes of preventing local

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<sup>230</sup> McCraw, "City Vote Scheduled for Housing Measure."

<sup>231</sup> Douglas S. Massey and Nancy A. Denton, *American Apartheid: Segregation and the Making of the Underclass* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 2.

<sup>232</sup> Massey and Denton, *American Apartheid*, 9.

race riots and civil disorders.<sup>233</sup> Fifty individuals, or close to 17 percent of the project's population, participated in the survey. Many respondents desired equal job opportunities, better wages, and job training, thereby suggesting that residents in this area of Austin were greatly hampered in their opportunities to advance economically or socially. Moreover, participants contested that the City of Austin and HACA failed to provide good public housing for African Americans, citing high rents, virtually non-existent pest extermination, a lack of recreation facilities, and poor, antiquated facilities as evidence of discriminatory practices. The study concluded that housing problems and a shortage of employment opportunities together greatly contributed to tenants' concerns.<sup>234</sup>

Booker T.'s residents struggled to address their complaints. Ultimately, tenants believed that they could not improve their living situations through existing, ineffective "grievance mechanisms," a sentiment that foreshadowed some residents' shift to other, more aggressive tactics, including legal action.<sup>235</sup> The 1968 report also noted that many tenants bemoaned a perceived lack of unified African-American leadership or support for the civil rights movement in East Austin, a concern shared by many African-American communities across the country.<sup>236</sup> As explained by historian Jeffrey Helgeson in his study of Black neighborhoods in mid-twentieth-century Chicago, the construction of segregated public housing helped to cement existing urban racial divisions while creating

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<sup>233</sup> Robert Powell Stewart, "A Study of the Dissatisfactions of Negro Residents of the Booker T. Washington Housing Project, Austin, Texas," (M.S.W. thesis, The University of Texas at Austin, 1968), 2, 7.

<sup>234</sup> Stewart, "A Study of the Dissatisfactions of Negro Residents of the Booker T. Washington Housing Project," 13, 19, 21, 41–43.

<sup>235</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

<sup>236</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

challenges for African-American community organizing.<sup>237</sup> Elite Black leadership primarily focused on fighting signs of segregation in highly-visible public spheres. To many of these Black leaders of higher socio-economic status, public housing's dilapidated environments constituted a lower priority in the fight for overall equality. Public housing occupants recognized their limited ability and social standing in Chicago's power hierarchy and, consequently, "did what they could to improve day-to-day reality."<sup>238</sup>

Likewise, many residents of Austin's Black public housing took up the cause to better their own daily comfort and quality of life. Whether in response to deadly fires or criminal behavior, the Booker T. Washington Tenant Group repeatedly advocated for better living conditions, often taking their grievances elsewhere when HACA refused to respond. The aftermath of the July 17, 1970, disturbance provides one such example of HACA's intransigence. In an effort to better protect themselves and their families, the project's tenant group presented HACA with a petition asking for a security guard to prevent any potential future outbursts at the complex. The group argued that the proposed guards, whether professionals or the project's teenage residents, would satisfy the tenants' desire to "police ourselves," discourage troublemakers, and ameliorate the complex's stressful environment.<sup>239</sup> This desire for more security illustrates that many of Booker T.'s occupants disapproved of the project's young agitators and regarded the complex's own tenant group as the legitimate and lawful way to effect needed change.

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<sup>237</sup> Jeffrey Helgeson, *Crucibles of Black Empowerment* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), 143.

<sup>238</sup> Helgeson, *Crucibles of Black Empowerment*, 135.

<sup>239</sup> "Projects' Security 'Good Idea,'" *Austin Statesman*, July 29, 1970, accessed January 11, 2017, <https://www.austinlibrary.com:8443/login?url=http://www.austinlibrary.com:2400/docview/1514644249?accountid=7451>.

The fact that they hoped for security guards who would not be the police highlights the era's emphasis on community control. This complex mix of political attitudes exemplified the times.

HACA took three years to respond to such pleas, despite initial support for the idea from Police Chief Miles, before finally hiring a resident as a security guard after a series of break-ins shook the project in January 1973.<sup>240</sup> HACA's delayed response revealed its disinterest in properly responding to tenant grievances or proactively creating a safe environment. The housing authority only made nominal changes when inarguable evidence demanded its action. HACA's intractable disregard for tenant safety demonstrates the authority's ineptitude and once again accentuates its marked departure from cultivating the wholesome, family-friendly setting seen in its earlier operations.

Along with combatting crime, residents fought to get the basic sanitary conditions promised by HACA and its slum clearance policies. In 1968, Gladys Hennington of the Booker T. Washington Tenant Group complained to the city council about the project's rodent and roach infestation. Hennington alleged that rats had bitten eight people, raising concerns about hepatitis and other diseases, and noted that residents had delivered a 260-signature petition to Project Manager Lloyd Curley and HACA Executive Director Harmon Hodges. In the petition, residents asked for the housing authority to eradicate all pests. Unsurprisingly, HACA half-heartedly offered to address the problem by setting up box-traps and suggesting that fifteen resident volunteers could be trained to exterminate the rats. HOC Board President LaSalle Barnett reminded Austin City Council that Booker

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<sup>240</sup> "Guard Hired for Housing Complex," *Austin Statesman*, January 10, 1973, accessed January 11, 2017, <https://www.austinlibrary.com:8443/login?url=http://www.austinlibrary.com:2400/docview/1515177038?accountid=7451>.

T. and other properties had experienced this rodent problem numerous times and volunteer extermination proved to be an ineffectual program because they could never get helpers. Another representative of the Booker T. group, Jorge Guerra, explained that the rodent problem extended beyond the project's borders, as East Austin had "breeding grounds for miles around."<sup>241</sup> Citizens used nearby tracts of land as convenient dumping grounds, consequently contributing to the neighborhood's unsightly and unsanitary conditions. These dumping grounds, which recall the area's former slums, reveal that residents' problems with HACA extended well beyond Booker T.'s borders to involve the City of Austin, another complicit agent in allowing East Austin's continued degradation and marginalization.<sup>242</sup>

HACA expressed its discriminatory attitudes towards its African-American residents in other ways beyond ignoring Booker T.'s residents' health and safety. In fact, HACA ensured that all of its Black tenants would be forever relegated to second-class-citizen status by constructing its future Black and Latino-serving complexes in East Austin. In 1969, HACA, with support from HUD, approved the construction of a ninth public housing project, referred to as Project TEX1-9. The new complex's proposed 39-

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<sup>241</sup> City Council of Austin, Texas, "Minutes of the City Council, Regular Meeting," October 10, 1968: 17, accessed January 11, 2017, <http://www.austintexas.gov/edims/document.cfm?id=38004>.

<sup>242</sup> East Austin's dumping grounds are evidence of environmental racism. Environmental racism refers to practices that adversely affect certain individuals or populations based on their race or color. Environmental racism as a concept emerged in the 1970s in correlation with the Environmental Justice Movement. Unfortunately, environmental racism continues in our country today, seen most recently with the Flint, Michigan, water crisis. For more on environmental racism, see Robert D. Bullard, "The Threat of Environmental Racism," *Natural Resources & the Environment* 7, no. 3 (Winter 1993), 23–26, 55–56, accessed May 28, 2017, <http://www.jstor.org.libproxy.txstate.edu/stable/40923229>; Martin V. Melosi, "Equity, Eco-Racism, and Environmental History," *Environmental History Review* 19, no. 3 (Autumn 1995), 1–16, accessed May 28, 2017, <http://www.jstor.org.libproxy.txstate.edu/stable/3984909>.

acre parcel of land was located outside of Austin's city limits, just northeast of Airport Boulevard and Ed Bluestein Boulevard in far East Austin. HACA had been developing Project TEX1-9 since before the passage of the Fair Housing Act of 1968. The housing authority did not let this new law disrupt its plans. Initial planning began in February 1966, when HACA received another Cooperation Agreement from the city council. This agreement allowed HACA to build 1,000 public housing units (750 family units and 250 elderly units). Following Austin City Council's annexation and rezoning (approved at the council's June 5, 1969 meeting), HUD sanctioned the site in November 1969.<sup>243</sup> With HUD's approval, HACA and the City of Austin disregarded the Fair Housing Act's provisions and pursued Project TEX1-9 as yet another non-white project that would further cement East Austin's racial identity.

The Project TEX1-9 case escalated East Austin's public housing residents' citizen-directed political actions, as tenants excoriated HACA's misconduct in projects beyond their own, subsequently turning even the city's future public housing into a theater of struggle. In June 1970, a group of East Austin citizens, together known as the Blackshear Residents Organization (BRO), filed a 101-page complaint outlining how HACA consciously and continuously carried out "a racially discriminatory public housing system within the City of Austin" by both selecting local sites that "perpetrate[d] existing patterns of segregation" and by "maintaining segregated occupancy patterns in public housing projects already built."<sup>244</sup> BRO activists, which included some Booker T.

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<sup>243</sup> *Blackshear Residents Organization, Et Al. vs. Housing Authority of Austin, Et Al.*, 347 F. Supp. 1138, 6 (W.D. Tex. 1972).

<sup>244</sup> *Blackshear Residents Organization, Et Al. vs. Housing Authority of Austin, Et Al.*, Complaint, Declaratory and Injunctive Relief, Civil Action No. A-70-Ca-51, 3 (W.D. Tex. 1970)

residents, sought to enforce the 1968 Fair Housing Act's promises by legally challenging HACA and HUD's plans. To do so and thus stop construction of TEX1-9, they would have to prove that the agencies intentionally refused to comply with the law. BRO's efforts demonstrate the increasing intensity of Booker T. and East Austin residents' endeavors in challenging HACA and the City of Austin's long-established racist policies, as activists moved beyond local tenant meetings and petitions to widely-publicized legal tactics to prevent future housing discrimination.

As represented by BRO, activist residents' ever-strengthening commitment to achieve better living conditions and fairer housing opportunities for Austin's public housing occupants succeeded in stopping HACA from expanding its segregated operations. After a year of legal conflict, presiding Judge Jack Roberts submitted his injunction and memorandum opinion.<sup>245</sup> In his decision, Roberts permanently enjoined HACA and its associates from administering or creating any public housing policies that violated HUD's official guidelines. Secondly, he permanently halted any further work on Project TEX1-9 until HACA and HUD proved that the site was not located in a Black or Latino-dominated area or if no other suitable site existed.<sup>246</sup> According to Roberts, both agencies failed to fulfill their responsibilities to provide equal housing opportunities to all Austinites. Project TEX1-9's site selection in East Austin had purposefully determined its prospective residents' racial character in an attempt to continue the city's segregation and thwart any attempts at project integration.

While BRO succeeded in drawing attention to HACA's discriminatory policies,

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<sup>245</sup> The memorandum opinion was amended March 17, 1972.

<sup>246</sup> *Blackshear Residents Organization, Et Al. vs. Housing Authority of Austin, Et Al.*, 347 F. Supp. 1138, 2.

the group failed to convince Roberts to order HACA's adoption of affirmative action in tenant selection procedures, mostly because HACA agreed to use its previously-established "freedom of choice" plan. This plan, adopted by its board of commissioners in 1967, meant to eradicate intentional segregation through its "first come-first serve" process. Clients were put on a waiting list, and once an appropriate unit became available, it was offered to those at the top of the list. The client could reject units twice before being placed back on the list.<sup>247</sup> HACA verbally agreed to follow this plan, but it soon became clear that HACA barely changed its ways and continued to pursue segregated public housing.

HACA's discriminatory operations intensified throughout the 1970s and further solidified segregation throughout its public housing. In 1979, Austin's Human Relations Commission (HRC) published a study on Austin's housing patterns with a particular focus on the city's legacy of segregation and discrimination. The HRC found that public housing's segregation had only worsened in the wake of the Project TEX1-9 case. Booker T. Washington Terrace was entirely non-white in character, while Rosewood Courts increased from 96 percent to 99.4 percent non-white from 1972 to 1977.<sup>248</sup> The HRC discovered that 79 percent of the 617 Black households living in public housing resided in East Austin's complexes. Other statistics further illustrated HACA's intentional and illegal segregation scheme. Though East Austin supplied 52 percent of the city's public housing, 66 percent of its non-white tenants lived there. In addition, the HRC found that

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<sup>247</sup> The City of Austin Human Relations Commission, *Housing Patterns Study: Segregation and Discrimination in Austin, Texas* (Austin: City of Austin, 1979), chapter 9, 6, 10.

<sup>248</sup> As of 1977, Booker T. Washington's ethnic composition was 89 percent African-American and 11 percent Mexican-American. Rosewood Courts' ethnic composition was 92 percent African-American, 7.4 percent Mexican-American, and .6 percent white.

the housing authority offered African Americans and Mexican Americans units in Black- and Latino-only complexes and steered whites to apartments in white-only complexes.<sup>249</sup> After examining HACA's records, the HRC concluded that "by all measures, the desegregation that Judge Roberts expected to take place in the wake of the 'freedom of choice' tenant assignment policy has not occurred."<sup>250</sup> Though public housing served as an opportunity to foster residential integration throughout Austin, HACA instead continued to unofficially segregate the complexes "that were segregated by official policy from 1939 to 1967."<sup>251</sup>

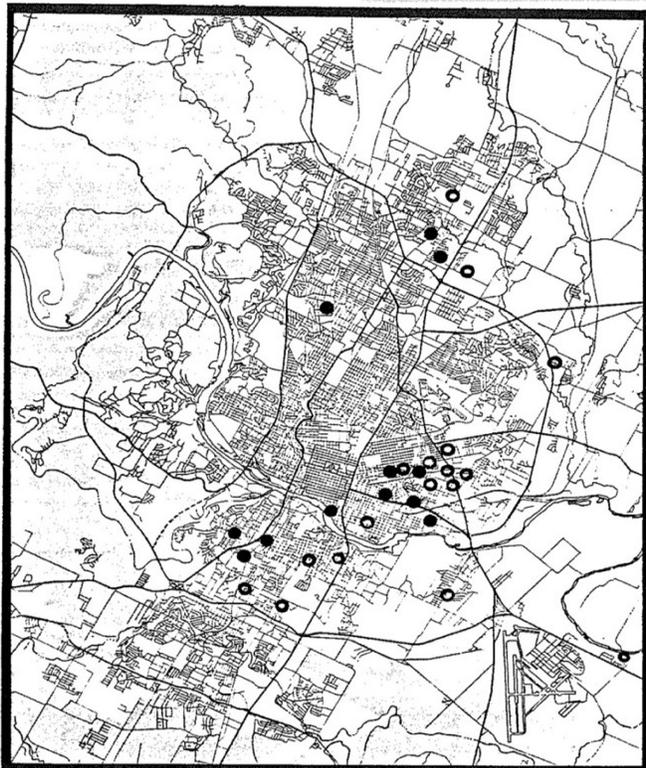


Figure 8: Map of federally-assisted housing, 1979. Map includes both public housing and Sections 221(d)(3) and 236, which were mostly concentrated in East Austin. Courtesy Map 9.2, The City of Austin Human Relations Commission's Housing Patterns Study, Austin History Center, Austin Public Library.

<sup>249</sup> Human Relations Commission, *Housing Patterns Study*, chapter 9, 7–10.

<sup>250</sup> *Ibid.*, chapter 9, 10.

<sup>251</sup> *Ibid.*, chapter 9, 7.

Eventually, HACA, cautious about risking more litigation, sold the Project TEX1-9 site. BRO's lawsuit exposed HACA's unlawful discriminatory planning schemes and signaled that the Fair Housing Act had done little to enforce local agencies' adherence to equal housing opportunities. Furthermore, the law's limited abilities forced affected individuals to take extreme measures, such as filing lawsuits, to effect much-needed change. Still, BRO and Booker T.'s tenants did make progress in advancing their causes, eventually earning admiration from HACA itself. In 1976, Housing Manager Bill Blanks heralded the Booker T. Washington Tenant Group's hard work in bettering the project's conditions for tenants at Booker T. "There are twenty-five active people and the group is very constructive—they make plans and take action. They even handle family squabbles effectively. I'm very proud of them."<sup>252</sup>

## V. Conclusion

Booker T.'s troubled story reveals the local housing authority's departure from its original New Deal-era purpose and its failure to provide for its residents, who represented some of Austin's most vulnerable citizens. More generally, HACA's treatment of, and future plans for, Austin's complexes for Black residents encapsulates trends seen in public housing during this era nationally. Housing authorities operated on ever-shrinking budgets, leading to the projects' physical deterioration, rising crime rates, and declining reputations. Tenants, who had little choice about where they could live, inhabited worsening complexes overseen by inefficient and careless management. In the midst of ignoring their occupants' welfare, these administrators followed established, racist

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<sup>252</sup> Marilyn Marshall, "Austin Housing Development Concerns All its Inhabitants," *Austin American-Statesman*, April 5, 1976, accessed January 11, 2017, <https://www.austinlibrary.com:8443/login?url=http://www.austinlibrary.com:2400/docview/1675280568?accountid=7451>.

tenant-assignment procedures, regardless of imposed legal measures designed to reverse residential segregation. In response to such discrimination and neglect, wronged tenants, in Austin and elsewhere, turned projects into theaters of struggle. These activist residents combatted housing authorities' systematic racism through various tactics and legal avenues, all in an effort to both better their lives and prevent African Americans' continued residential oppression, consequently forcing progress in achieving fairer housing conditions for all.

Ultimately, Black Austinites in public housing ensured that this would be a contested history. Together, the story of Rosewood Courts and Booker T. Washington Terrace illustrate the changes in Austin's public housing's goals and realities over a forty-year time span. Hidden in this narrative is a history of local community action to improve living standards in segregated neighborhoods. Far from being an unproblematic story of progress, it is still a history of heroic everyday action that deserves recognition and provides a reason to preserve what remains of public housing on the East Side of Austin.

## 4. REVIVING ROSEWOOD COURTS: AUSTIN'S CHANGING PUBLIC

### HOUSING AND THE DEBATE OVER ITS FUTURE, 2001–2017

#### I. Introduction

“The Housing Authority [of the City of Austin (HACA)] has a story to tell, and it’s a success story,” HACA Executive Director Jim Hargrove declared in 2001.<sup>253</sup> After four years, Hargrove’s administration had successfully reversed nearly fifteen years of egregious mismanagement and financial misconduct.<sup>254</sup> In 1997, the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) had exposed negligent operations reminiscent of the housing authority’s misconduct in the 1960s and 1970s. HACA had 330 vacancies—one out of seven units on average in each project—despite a waiting list with over one thousand people. Staff turnover was more than 100 percent per year. Over half of HACA’s units failed HUD inspections, as the housing authority declined to repair problems that had languished for years. Some projects, especially Booker T. Washington Terrace, offered poor living conditions—vermin ran through ceiling holes left by HACA repairmen when fixing damaged pipes, and broken furnaces forced some residents to use their kitchen stoves to heat their units.<sup>255</sup> In addition, HACA staff neglected to track contracts awarded to vendors or expenditures, and executives “violated federal cost principles” by paying for business luncheons, travel, and other

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<sup>253</sup> Mike Clark-Madison, “What’s Wrong with Public Housing?” *Austin Chronicle*, August 21, 2001, accessed March 15, 2017, <http://www.austinchronicle.com/news/2001-08-31/82842/>.

<sup>254</sup> In the mid-1980s, HUD added HACA to its list as one of the country’s most financially unstable housing authorities after HACA nearly declared bankruptcy.

<sup>255</sup> Clark-Madison, “What’s Wrong with Public Housing?”

personal expenses.<sup>256</sup> Under Hargrove, who took over operations in February 1997, the authority thoroughly reorganized its administration, fixed its rundown units, and returned to concentrating on what he called HACA's "core business of offering housing."<sup>257</sup> And they did so with remarkable success, largely by preserving HACA's existing housing stock.

Hargrove made a strategic decision to focus on preservation rather than replacement of housing units. Though he oversaw some of the oldest public housing properties in the country, Hargrove refused to turn to HUD's HOPE VI program because the program relied upon the demolition of existing units. To Hargrove, bulldozing available units would limit HACA's ability to house families. Such a program, he argued, would run counter to the housing authority's central purpose. According to Hargrove, older projects like Rosewood Courts (built in 1939) are "serviceable, and I can rehab [them] for less that it would take to rebuild. HOPE VI is better suited for inventory that truly is dilapidated, which this is not."<sup>258</sup> Hargrove's perspective stood out during a time when many cities and housing authorities embraced HOPE VI as the harbinger of much-needed housing reform. As expressed by the program's architect, HUD Secretary Henry Cisneros, HOPE VI's revolutionary model emphasized "replacement" as the "only reasonable course" to ultimately "save public housing, which had reached rock bottom in the court of public opinion."<sup>259</sup> Hargrove sought a different route to find new hope, one

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<sup>256</sup> D. Michael Beard, *Audit Report, 97-FW-209-1002* (San Antonio, TX: Department of Housing and Urban Development, July 1997), 19–20, iii–v.

<sup>257</sup> Clark-Madison, "What's Wrong with Public Housing?"

<sup>258</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>259</sup> Henry Cisneros and Lora Engdahl, eds., *From Despair to Hope: HOPE VI and the New Promise of Public Housing in America's Cities* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2009), 13, 4.

shaped by an appreciation for the earlier accomplishments of public housing officials, as well as a sense of the harm done when low-income people are displaced from their housing.

The hope to renew Austin's public housing by preserving existing units would not last. A decade after Hargrove had called for their rehabilitation, his successor, Michael Gerber, reconsidered HACA's attitude towards Rosewood Courts.<sup>260</sup> "The Housing Authority," Gerber told the press in 2014, "feels that something substantial has to change at Rosewood."<sup>261</sup> Though the project's sturdy brick walls made Rosewood "a very good tornado shelter," living was "hard" for the residents of Rosewood Courts, Gerber claimed, because the site no longer "works" for the families who lived there.<sup>262</sup> Gerber recalled the prevalent "discourse of disaster" that fuels the program's negative reputation and legitimizes the efforts to dismantle the program.<sup>263</sup> Rather than preserving historic housing and serving the people who lived there, Gerber would follow his contemporaries in public housing's third phase and seek to build the kind of mixed-income developments promoted by HUD's Choice Neighborhoods Initiative (CNI). In October 2012, Gerber reversed HACA's approach to Rosewood Courts with a \$300,000 HUD Choice Neighborhoods Planning Grant. The award enabled HACA to create a plan outlining the

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<sup>260</sup> Hargrove left HACA in 2012 to become Executive Director of the Housing Authority of Bexar County.

<sup>261</sup> Ken Herman, "Agency Moving Toward Demolition of Historic Rosewood Courts," *Austin American-Statesman*, October 11, 2014, accessed March 15, 2017, <http://www.mystatesman.com/news/opinion/herman-agency-moving-toward-demolition-historic-rosewood-courts/mxV94ALyhespSztOMVFJBL/>.

<sup>262</sup> Katie Pearl Halloran, "What's Next for Rosewood," *Austin Chronicle*, August 22, 2014, accessed February 15, 2017, <http://www.austinchronicle.com/news/2014-08-22/whats-next-for-rosewood/>; Herman, "Agency Moving Toward Demolition of Historic Rosewood Courts."

<sup>263</sup> Edward G. Goetz, *New Deal Ruins: Race, Economic Justice, and Public Housing Policy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013), 2.

redevelopment of Rosewood Courts and the surrounding Rosewood Neighborhood. For HACA, the grant represented a chance to replace Rosewood Courts' 1930s design with a new, and presumably better, mixed-income development. Moreover, a reconceived Rosewood Courts offered an opportunity for HACA to reengage with its original reform project. The new complex's upscale housing would, said the twenty-first century reformers in an echo of their New Deal predecessors, expose Rosewood residents to the physical, social, and economic benefits of homeownership and cause them to aspire to a life without public housing, as modeled by their new wealthier community members.

Not everyone saw Gerber's new plan for Rosewood Courts as being salutary. Indeed, the announcement of the new HUD grant galvanized a movement among local preservationists to save the complex, an effort grounded in an understanding of its local and national significance. Residents' responses were mixed. For some, the grant created excitement, with the hope for modern amenities appealing to people struggling with rundown apartments. The majority, however, weighed the potential benefits against concerns that rehabilitation would bring the reality of at least temporarily leaving their current homes, if not permanent displacement.

The ensuing years-long dispute over the fate of Rosewood Courts pitted HACA and against preservationists, Rosewood residents, Austin City Council, and other community members. The debate over Rosewood marked a new era of Austin's ongoing troubled relationship with both public housing and its African-American citizens. Rosewood's prospective demolition and renovation exemplifies current attitudes toward federal public housing and its place in a changing urban landscape. In part, the change has come because the gentrification of U.S. cities has turned previously undesirable

locations into highly valuable real estate. The potential destruction of Rosewood Courts, in particular, raises questions about the project's occupants as well as East Austin's African-American community writ large. For those advocating for the rehabilitation of the Courts, the buildings' preservation must be informed by, and provides an opportunity for expanding understanding of, Austin's history of racism, neighborhood segregation, and the struggle against it. The preservation and rehabilitation of Rosewood Courts thereby offers a chance to better existing residents' living conditions in what has long been an indispensable housing project without risking the permanent displacement of existing residents. Significantly, preservation would also protect a site that could be used to educate broad public audiences about the inception of federal public housing programs along with their revealing history of the possibilities and limits of housing reform. Such a site could also illustrate how citizen action has worked to improve low-income communities over the past eight decades. Saving Rosewood Courts would further recognize the integral roles African Americans have played in Austin's history and thus foster a broad understanding of the history and politics of race, class, and the built environment.

## II. Progress through Demolition: HACA's New Approach to Public Housing

HACA's planning grant for the Rosewood area promotes strategies developed by HOPE VI. HUD established HOPE VI in 1992 as a new approach to reviving severely distressed public housing by revamping their physical appearances, reducing concentrations of poverty through the creation of mixed-income communities, and

pursuing private-public partnerships.<sup>264</sup> HUD's current program, the Choice Neighborhood Initiative (CNI), follows HOPE VI's precedent of replacing old complexes with "high-quality mixed-income housing" while also endeavoring to improve local schools, encourage the area's economic growth, and revive struggling neighborhoods.<sup>265</sup> HACA's CNI concept, submitted to HUD on April 8, 2015, combines public housing with luxury units geared towards high-income buyers able to invest in the East Austin neighborhood. The proposed design echoes a common residential model found throughout the city today: a modern mixed-use facility, which features energy-efficient, spacious units accompanied by community parks and amenities including a fitness center, computer lab, and commercial/retail spaces.<sup>266</sup> Like the reformist ideals that drove the project's initial construction in 1939, the proposed Rosewood Courts seeks to combine upscale construction, therapeutic green space, and contemporary planning ideals to create a well-functioning community that catalyzes residents to "dream big" and join the middle class by "becom[ing] economically self-sufficient."<sup>267</sup> Similarly, HACA's plan outlines the development of social welfare programs comparable to those offered during Rosewood's early years, such as creating an early childhood education center and

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<sup>264</sup> "About HOPE VI," HOPE VI – Public and Indian Housing, last modified 2010, accessed April 14, 2017, [https://portal.hud.gov/hudportal/HUD?src=/program\\_offices/public\\_indian\\_housing/programs/ph/hope6/about](https://portal.hud.gov/hudportal/HUD?src=/program_offices/public_indian_housing/programs/ph/hope6/about).

<sup>265</sup> "Choice Neighborhoods," U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development Public Housing, last modified 2016, accessed April 1, 2017, [https://portal.hud.gov/hudportal/HUD?src=/program\\_offices/public\\_indian\\_housing/programs/ph/cn](https://portal.hud.gov/hudportal/HUD?src=/program_offices/public_indian_housing/programs/ph/cn).

<sup>266</sup> "Final Rosewood Choice Neighborhoods Plan Submitted to HUD," Rosewood: Austin's Choice Neighborhood, last modified 2015, accessed April 1, 2017, <https://rosewoodchoice.com/2015/02/28/transformation-plan-posted/>; Housing Authority of the City of Austin and the Austin Housing Finance Corporation, *Rosewood Choice Neighborhoods Plan* (Austin, TX: Housing Authority of the City of Austin, 2015), 52.

<sup>267</sup> Housing Authority of the City of Austin, *Annual Report for 2006–2007* (Austin, TX: Housing Authority of the City of Austin, 2007), 6.

improving residents' access to healthcare. In addressing other topics such as area schools and public transportation, the Transformation Plan aims to revitalize the entire neighborhood through a phased development.<sup>268</sup> Yet the plan primarily lists existing resources and the housing authority's desired outcomes while including only unclear strategies for its execution. For example, HACA merely states that it will make its "best effort" to prevent schoolchildren's displacement.<sup>269</sup> If Rosewood tenants must relocate while the project is reconstructed, their kids may be forced withdraw from neighborhood schools and enroll elsewhere, subsequently hurting some local schools', such as Blackshear Elementary, already-low enrollment figures.<sup>270</sup> Despite these vague suggestions, HACA affirms that the Rosewood Choice Neighborhood, with the new Rosewood Courts at its center, will become "a stable, true mixed-income community" that reflects the area residents' diverse cultures and supports the project's residents' ascension from "poverty to prosperity."<sup>271</sup>

HACA's problematic Rosewood Choice Neighborhoods Planning Initiative Transformation Plan depends on the Courts' demolition as the pathway to the Rosewood Neighborhood's revitalization. And history teaches that demolition threatens to displace current residents without adding any new units to the total number available in a growing city with ever-increasing costs of living. HACA follows the CNI's stipulation that the new complex includes the exact number of public housing units currently onsite (124). The housing authority promised these accommodations to current Rosewood tenants,

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<sup>268</sup> Housing Authority of the City of Austin and the Austin Housing Finance Corporation, *Rosewood Choice Neighborhoods Plan*, 83–93, 56.

<sup>269</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.

<sup>270</sup> *Ibid.*, 58, 79.

<sup>271</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

effectively maintaining the project's present composition and character. HACA, however, chose not to increase the future Courts' number of public housing residences despite the city's desperate need for more low-income facilities. As of 2015, HACA operated eighteen projects, which house 1,838 dwellings. In addition, HACA provided Housing Choice Vouchers to almost six thousand individuals and families. These existing resources do not satisfy Austin's low-income housing needs. In January 2015, HACA's waiting list totaled more than eight thousand units.<sup>272</sup> The housing authority's decision to only rebuild 124 residences in the new complex consciously ignores this lengthy waiting list and excludes any eligible occupants who do not already live onsite. HACA, like many other housing authorities across the country, vows to prioritize serving the project's existing tenants. Yet just as many of those authorities' promises fell short, HACA's proposed limited provisions suggest shortsighted neglect on the authority's part in fulfilling its central purpose and providing housing to those in need.

Rather than use the new Rosewood Courts to expand the city's public housing program, HACA proposes to construct seventy-six market-rate rental units and twenty-five homeownership units.<sup>273</sup> These accommodations would satisfy CNI's objectives and make Rosewood Courts a mixed-income community, merging the neighborhood's low-income households with high-earners who are competing for valuable real estate. Recalling the New Deal era's housing strategy, HACA hopes this mixed-income model, populated by wealthier residents and brand-new facilities, would influence public housing residents to find better employment and housing opportunities and perhaps one day move beyond public housing, which HACA describes as a "transitional time" in

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<sup>272</sup> *Ibid.*, 119, 53.

<sup>273</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

occupants' lives.<sup>274</sup> While this optimistic interpretation of mixed-income housing's rehabilitative qualities evokes HACA's original social objectives, in reality, many of the mixed-income approach's "assumed benefits... such as role modeling, provide little positive impact" on low-income inhabitants' lives.<sup>275</sup>

Scholars such as Lawrence Vale document the weaknesses of this mixed-income approach, arguing that even its unclear definition underscores the concept's inefficacy. Housing authorities apply the term "mixed-income housing" to a number of different combinations of public housing, market-rate units and/or subsidized housing. This inconsistent terminology fails to specify what mixed-income housing actually *is* and which iteration works. More significantly, mixed-income housing's financial success proves difficult to measure because every development behaves differently due to its unique socioeconomic character.<sup>276</sup> Existing research hardly provides definitive evidence that corroborates "most of the cherished assumptions" about mixed-income housing's benefits.<sup>277</sup> As related to Rosewood Courts and Austin, Vale notes that mixed-income housing in gentrifying urban areas can either accelerate the removal of affordable housing or act as the sole solution for saving the neighborhood's remaining low-income housing resources.<sup>278</sup> HACA's new Rosewood Courts would indeed speed up East Austin's gentrification by prioritizing the creation of market-rate units over additional affordable

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<sup>274</sup> "To All New Residents of Rosewood Courts," *The Rosewood Report*, January 2014, accessed April 15, 2017, <https://rosewoodchoice.files.wordpress.com/2012/12/2014-01-the-rosewood-report-vol-1-iss-3.pdf>.

<sup>275</sup> Lawrence Vale, "Myth #6 Mixed-Income Redevelopment is the Only Way to Fix Failed Public Housing" in *Public Housing Myths*, ed. Nicholas Dagen Bloom, Fritz Umbach, and Lawrence J. Vale (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2015), 142.

<sup>276</sup> Vale, "Myth #6 Mixed-Income Redevelopment is the Only Way to Fix Failed Public Housing," 144.

<sup>277</sup> *Ibid.*, 147.

<sup>278</sup> *Ibid.*, 152.

housing, which would not only change the neighborhood's historic identity but also serve the housing authority's financial self-interest. These market-rate units and their high rents would add a substantial revenue source for HACA and supplement income earned from its public housing operations. By mimicking other area developers and capitalizing on the neighborhood's changing demographics, the housing authority's new development would participate in the city's booming real estate market and thus protect HACA from repeating its financial mishaps of the 1980s and 1990s. Ironically, by buying into the market forces driving East Austin's gentrification and its rising home prices, HACA's market-rate units would help the housing authority, in the words of Executive President Michael Gerber, "break even or make a little bit of money" to finance their own operations in a city with already scarce affordable housing for its low-income residents.<sup>279</sup>

HACA assumes that Rosewood Courts' age makes demolition necessary. The housing authority describes the seventy-eight-year-old project as lacking "long-term physical and social viability" and exhibiting "severe physical and unit distress," rendering it unfit for habitation.<sup>280</sup> When questioned about the property, HACA repeatedly provides stock answers to depict the project's poor living conditions and support its demolition: mold and mildew; exposed pipes and brick walls that create an austere environment and make hanging pictures impossible; no central heating or air conditioning; no dryer hookups; and a complete lack of wall insulation, which limits units' energy efficiency. More substantial issues include the property's hilly terrain and absence of handicap-accessible ramps, making the complex difficult for physically-challenged individuals to

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<sup>279</sup> Halloran, "What's Next for Rosewood."

<sup>280</sup> *Ibid.*

navigate.<sup>281</sup>



Figure 9: Rosewood Courts' hilly terrain, 2017. HACA cites Rosewood Courts' landscape as one reason for the project's redevelopment. Photo by Lindsey Waldenberg.

HACA's current approach to Rosewood Courts again exemplifies the “discourse of disaster” that characterizes widely held assumptions about the “failure” of public housing.<sup>282</sup> Edward Goetz argues that this narrative fails to differentiate between successful and ineffective housing authorities and instead mislabels all projects as inherently dysfunctional. Goetz criticizes this broad interpretation for ignoring the reality that public housing “in most places... worked—and still does work.”<sup>283</sup> Federal and local governments distort conceptions of the program's efficacy and residents' quality of life to gain support for dismantling the public housing program, which happens in three basic ways: purposefully not increasing the number of existing units (evidenced by increased demolition), emphasizing housing vouchers and subsidies of the Low-Income Housing

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<sup>281</sup> *Ibid.*; Housing Authority of the City of Austin and the Austin Housing Finance Corporation, *Rosewood Choice Neighborhoods Plan*, 42–43.

<sup>282</sup> Goetz, *New Deal Ruins*, 2.

<sup>283</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

Tax Credit as the primary forms of housing assistance, and choosing not to invest in the program's future.<sup>284</sup> This "discourse of disaster" infuses HACA's approach to Rosewood Courts. HACA refuses to increase the project's number of public housing units while promoting a fatalistic interpretation of current conditions to argue for the historic property's demolition. HACA's embrace of a new mixed-income community as the ideal future for Rosewood Courts and its current low-income residents showcases the government's preference for solving the perceived problem of public housing through its destruction and through plans that will displace residents, profit private developers, and push the core problems of housing and economic inequality down the road. Still, HACA wished to gain support for its plan. In particular, the housing authority solicited resident participation to give tenants a "strong voice," seeking to reverse what HACA (inaccurately) described as public housing residents' historically inactive participation in "development and neighborhood improvement decisions."<sup>285</sup> The housing authority sponsored numerous resident meetings, community gatherings, and task force and work group meetings to consider current residents' voices and needs.<sup>286</sup> Having joined in the planning stages, the complex's younger residents responded most enthusiastically to Rosewood Courts' prospective reinvention. Taneka Perkins, a Rosewood resident since 2011, welcomes redevelopment because "things need to be changed for people that have

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<sup>284</sup> *Ibid.*, 3–5.

<sup>285</sup> As shown in Chapter Three, public housing residents have been very active in advocating for improvements to their homes and community; Housing Authority of the City of Austin and the Austin Housing Finance Corporation, *Rosewood Choice Neighborhoods Plan*, 1.

<sup>286</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

to live here.”<sup>287</sup> Another tenant, Kenesha Campbell, shared that her home “felt like a jail cell,” suggesting that the project’s problems stem not from its upkeep but from its original design.<sup>288</sup> Campbell spoke out against the Courts’ physical conditions and complained that her apartment’s brick walls trap “heat and sweat, causing mold to grow.”<sup>289</sup> Moreover, Campbell’s residence felt impersonal. “Home should be a place where you hang pictures, not tape pictures,” she declared.<sup>290</sup> Perkins’ and Campbell’s statements support the popular public housing disaster narrative by characterizing Rosewood as uninhabitable according to contemporary living standards. Such expressions give credence to HACA’s claims that Rosewood Courts desperately needs substantial change that is achievable only through demolition.

Perkins and Campbell’s opinions, however, do not encapsulate all residents’ views, for as Perkins put it, some occupants “want to move on anyways, but some don’t want to see any change.”<sup>291</sup> Older residents, wary of leaving the residences they’ve inhabited for years, have tended to reject HACA’s plan and instead advocated for modernization of the existing units.<sup>292</sup> Seventy-eight year-old resident Matt Bragg, president of the resident council, supported rehabilitation because “tear[ing] it all down

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<sup>287</sup> Mary Tuma, “Living History,” *Austin Chronicle*, March 25, 2016, accessed February 15, 2017, <http://www.austinchronicle.com/news/2016-03-25/living-history/>.

<sup>288</sup> Ken Herman, “A Historic Past, an Uncertain Future,” *Austin American-Statesman*, September 29, 2013, accessed February 15, 2017, <http://www.austinlibrary.com:2171/resources/doc/nb/news/14922AF3B1DD3E58?p=NewsBank>.

<sup>289</sup> Ken Herman, “A Historic Past, an Uncertain Future.”

<sup>290</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>291</sup> Halloran, “What’s Next for Rosewood?”

<sup>292</sup> Anonymous, 2017, interview by Lindsey Waldenberg. Given the sensitivity of this issue, which is still being debated among Rosewood residents, preservation groups, and the city council, I have redacted my source’s identity.

and start[ing] over from scratch... would be way too expensive.”<sup>293</sup> HACA’s 2013 Rosewood Choice Neighborhood Resident Needs Assessment documented residents’ overall satisfaction with the project’s current conditions. Out of the 98 participating households, 78 percent of surveyed respondents reported being somewhat or very satisfied with their dwellings. Fifty percent shared that they plan to live in Rosewood Courts for as long as possible, starkly contrasting with HACA’s promotion of public housing as a temporary stop on recipients’ journeys toward social and economic rise.<sup>294</sup> The majority of tenants, understandably, feel connected to these spaces and the greater Rosewood community and thus support rehabilitation as a means of saving their homes in which they plan to live for years to come.

Much of the residents’ backing depends on HACA’s promises to provide Rosewood’s tenants with units in the new project. HACA Executive President Gerber has guaranteed Rosewood occupants’ right to return or else “we won’t do the project.”<sup>295</sup> Though 80 percent of surveyed residents expressed willingness to temporarily relocate during construction, other residents remain skeptical of HACA’s promise.<sup>296</sup> Their concerns are well-founded. It is unclear where these current tenants will go or whether they will meet eligibility requirements once the new Rosewood Courts is up and running. Additionally, most public housing inhabitants affected by HOPE VI demolitions and HUD-funded redevelopment projects do not return to the rebuilt sites. Studies show that for approximately four out of every five of these affected families, demolition and

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<sup>293</sup> Ken Herman, “A Historic Past, an Uncertain Future.”

<sup>294</sup> Housing Authority of the City of Austin, *Rosewood Choice Neighborhoods Resident Need Assessment* (Austin, TX: Housing Authority of the City of Austin, 2013), 24.

<sup>295</sup> Halloran, “What’s Next for Rosewood?”

<sup>296</sup> Housing Authority of the City of Austin, *Rosewood Choice Neighborhoods Resident Need Assessment*, 23; Anonymous, 2017, interview by Lindsey Waldenberg.

redevelopment “*only* [mean] displacement and relocation, typically to other low-income, segregated neighborhoods.”<sup>297</sup> While HACA’s promises are encouraging, HUD’s and other housing authorities’ track records suggests that Rosewood’s current residents would have a minimal chance to enjoy their new surroundings.

HACA’s determination to reconfigure Rosewood Courts recalls its initial mission developed eighty years ago. This time, however, HACA seeks to fix the problems itself created through years of minimal upkeep. By promoting demolition and reconstruction as the best scenario for the Courts’ future sustainability, the Transformation Plan devalues Rosewood Courts’ historic status and importance in the local Black community and further dismantles public housing as a national program. In reality, Rosewood Courts’ older buildings do not prevent HACA from creating communities where “poverty is alleviated, residents are healthy and safe, and all people have the opportunity to reach their full potential.”<sup>298</sup>

### III. Progress through Preservation: Austin’s Newfound Effort to Protect Rosewood Courts and Recognize its Historic Status

HACA’s Transformation Plan elicited negative reactions from members of the city council and the city’s preservation community concerned about protecting the property. Critics of the plan counter that HACA failed to care for the project and is now trying to erase a problem that it created rather than deal with the fundamental issues of housing and economic inequality.<sup>299</sup> For the past forty years, numerous authorities across the country, including the Housing Authority of New Orleans and the Chicago Housing

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<sup>297</sup> Goetz, *New Deal Ruins*, 13; original emphasis included.

<sup>298</sup> “Vision,” Housing Authority of the City of Austin Mission/Vision, last modified 2017, accessed April 15, 2017, <https://www.hacanet.org/about/mission-vision/>.

<sup>299</sup> Tuma, “Living History.”

Authority, have embraced similar demolition and reconstruction plans as easier and cheaper solutions for problems posed by poorly-managed, rundown complexes. Often, housing authorities employed de facto demolition as a way to get rid of troublesome projects. By neglecting these properties, the complexes would deteriorate to such an extent that demolition appeared to be the only solution. Demolition escalated during the Reagan Administration, when the federal government emphasized housing vouchers as the primary form of low-income housing assistance and thus freed authorities from adhering to the restrictive “one-for-one replacement” that had dictated the public housing program for decades.<sup>300</sup> With this newfound carte blanche for demolition, housing authorities began tearing down thousands of units per year. Eventually, in 1995, HUD’s HOPE VI made demolition official policy, leading to the removal of more than 110,000 public housing units across the country, with only 60,000 of those being replaced in the program’s mixed-income projects.<sup>301</sup> This is the difficult situation that Austin preservationists face.

Demolition has disproportionately hit African American residents of public housing, as housing authorities regularly have chosen to eliminate predominantly African-American projects and forcibly removed Black residents from their homes.<sup>302</sup> HUD’s reinvention of public housing continues to affect Black communities, whether they inhabit these projects or live in surrounding neighborhoods, because public housing is “disproportionately occupied by people of color... and is disproportionately located in

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<sup>300</sup> Goetz, *New Deal Ruins*, 50.

<sup>301</sup> *Ibid.*, 69.

<sup>302</sup> *Ibid.*, 8–9.

minority neighborhoods.”<sup>303</sup> Race and demolition likewise intersect in the case of Rosewood Courts. Ever since its construction, the Courts and its surrounding neighborhood have been overwhelmingly African-American. Yet the neighborhood’s racial composition, solidified by the City of Austin’s 1928 Koch and Fowler Plan and ensuing public housing construction, is quickly changing due, in part, to its location in “the fastest-gentrifying zip code in the United States.”<sup>304</sup> In 2000, African Americans constituted more than 50 percent of the neighborhood’s population. Ten years later, that number decreased to 35.4 percent, as Mexican-American and white residents moved in while African Americans moved out.<sup>305</sup> Rosewood Courts’ demolition would speed up this removal of Black residents from East Austin, as displaced occupants would either temporarily, or more likely permanently, reside in low-income facilities located outside of the neighborhood.

As part of an effort to stem East Austin’s Black exodus, in February 2016, Austin City Council approved a resolution, sponsored by District 1 Councilmember Ora Houston, to begin the historic zoning process, and hence protection, for Rosewood Courts.<sup>306</sup> Houston’s resolution sought to revive the effort to get Rosewood Courts listed on the National Register of Historic Places, a procedure initiated a few years earlier. In November 2013, Dr. Fred McGhee, a local housing activist responsible for the inclusion of another local complex, Santa Rita Courts, on the National Register, submitted a

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<sup>303</sup> As of 2000, African Americans represented 48 percent of public housing residents despite comprising just 12.9 percent of America’s population; *Ibid.*, 112.

<sup>304</sup> Austin City Council, February 25, 2016, Resolution No. 20160225-048, accessed April 15, 2017, <http://www.austintexas.gov/edims/document.cfm?id=250416>.

<sup>305</sup> Housing Authority of the City of Austin and the Austin Housing Finance Corporation, *Rosewood Choice Neighborhoods Plan*, 18.

<sup>306</sup> Austin City Council, Resolution No. 20160225-048.

nomination form to the Texas Historical Commission (THC) for its approval. As part of the review procedure, the THC, Texas's State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO), accepted and forwarded the nomination to the National Park Service (NPS) in May 2014. The NPS, which oversees the National Register, called for a revision of the claims of significance and a resubmittal of the application. Paul R. Lusignan, NPS Historian and National Register Reviewer, contended that specificity would strengthen the nomination and suggested that the proposal especially emphasize the Courts' national importance as an early USHA-funded complex and its association with Lyndon B. Johnson.<sup>307</sup> Overall, Lusignan affirmed that the Courts retain enough integrity and historic fabric to meet the register's standards and "represent a place clearly deserving of federal recognition in the National Register," which already includes a number of public housing properties.<sup>308</sup>

Resident leaders at Rosewood Courts stand behind the nomination effort. Participants in the Rosewood Choice Neighborhoods Leadership Development program, co-sponsored by HACA, drafted a March 2014 letter to McGhee and the THC lending their support to the project's inclusion on the National Register. Most notably, their letter lamented the residents' exclusion from the process. "We care about our housing, our families, and our futures," the group shared, "and don't feel it is right that we are

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<sup>307</sup> These two aspects that would fall under the National Register's first two criteria that define a historic site or structure's significance. Criterion A acknowledges properties that are associated with historically-significant events, Criterion B applies to properties associated with important historical figures, Criterion C reflects distinctive architecture or design, and Criterion D relates to archaeology and prehistory.

<sup>308</sup> Paul Lusignan, "National Register of Historic Places - Return Comments," *Rosewood Courts, Travis County, TX*, September 2014.

continually left out of processes that should include us.”<sup>309</sup> Though the group granted that it does not represent all residents’ views, the individuals rightly wished to be involved because of the nomination’s potential benefits for their homes and changing neighborhood.

Reflecting the institutional ambivalence toward the project, HACA itself acknowledges Rosewood’s importance. As claimed in its Transformation Plan, HACA “has always recognized” Rosewood Courts’ historical significance and “looks forward” to working with preservationists and the City of Austin to save Rosewood Courts’ story.<sup>310</sup> HACA offered to fix and resubmit the nomination form to the NPS as well as preserve six of the original twenty-four residential buildings on site.<sup>311</sup> The housing authority’s Transformation Plan does not state if these preservation units, vestiges of the original Rosewood Courts, would be designated as public housing or which original buildings would be saved. Nonetheless, HACA uses this commitment to preserve six buildings as a symbol of its respect for the Courts’ history. The housing authority also plans to “market” the Rosewood Neighborhood’s “rich and significant history” through other means, including making space for a new Emancipation Park.<sup>312</sup>

Though HACA’s conciliatory offer to save part of Rosewood Courts appears

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<sup>309</sup> “Excerpts of a Letter from Rosewood Apprentices Regarding Potential Historic Designation,” *The Rosewood Report*, March 2014, accessed April 15, 2017, <https://rosewoodchoice.files.wordpress.com/2012/12/2014-03-the-rosewood-report-vol-1-iss-5.pdf>.

<sup>310</sup> Housing Authority of the City of Austin and the Austin Housing Finance Corporation, *Rosewood Choice Neighborhoods Plan*, 40.

<sup>311</sup> As of May 2017, HACA, preservationists, and the City of Austin are reportedly considering saving nine buildings.

<sup>312</sup> The original Emancipation Park, a defining site for Rosewood’s community celebrations in the early twentieth century, was commandeered by the City of Austin in the 1930s for Rosewood Courts’ construction; Halloran, “What’s Next for Rosewood.”

well-intentioned, the housing authority's anticipated demolition could affect the property's eligibility to be listed on the National Register and gain federal recognition. The strength of the project's admissibility stems in part from the complex's retention of "the unique character of the USHA-period design standards and superblock patterning;" if HACA eradicates a majority of the site and dismantles the Courts' defining spatial relationships, it would compromise the Courts' case for inclusion on the National Register.<sup>313</sup> Understandably, the NPS does not want to state which or how many of the property's buildings could be demolished and still be eligible for the National Register, as this would condone the destruction of historically valuable structures.<sup>314</sup>

Furthermore, the NPS's official acknowledgement of the complex's historical significance affects any future renovations. National Register inclusion does not impose any type of restrictions unless federal funds are involved in projects that could affect the listed property. Because Rosewood Courts meets the National Register's criteria, any type of construction or activities conducted by federal agencies, such as HUD, or involving federal funds, such as the CNI, would be subject to a process known as Section 106 review. Established by the 1966 National Historic Preservation Act, Section 106 determines if and how undertakings could affect historic properties and then assesses and resolves any adverse effects.<sup>315</sup> In the case of Rosewood Courts, HACA would need to consult with the THC and the public to find a favorable solution amenable to all affected buildings before embarking on any massive construction undertaking.

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<sup>313</sup> Paul Lusignan, "National Register of Historic Places - Return Comments."

<sup>314</sup> h+uo architects, *Rosewood Courts Preservation Economic Feasibility Assessment* (Austin, TX: h+uo architects, January 2017), 37.

<sup>315</sup> "Section 106 Regulations Summary," Working with Section 106, last modified April 18, 2013, accessed April 1, 2017, <http://www.achp.gov/106summary.html#identify>.

The city council's February 2016 resolution and renewed attempt to get Rosewood Courts included on the National Register represents the City of Austin's slight progress in valuing Austin's historic structures. In rejecting demolition, the City of Austin thus recognizes Austin's significant role in the public housing program and the dire need for low-income housing, especially in helping to preserve the Rosewood Neighborhood's history. The city council's actions also slowed down HACA's redevelopment plans and highlighted the preservation laws and protections that HACA must navigate. Though the resolution ordered the City Manager to present options for Rosewood's historic zoning by early June 2016, city politics and the need for more public dialogue have delayed the process and clouded Rosewood Courts' future. Still, with Austin City Council dedicated to saving Rosewood Courts and its history, it is unclear if, when, and to what degree HACA's plan for Rosewood's transformation will become reality.<sup>316</sup>

#### IV. Progress through Rehabilitation: Saving Austin's Low-Income Housing and Black History

Despite its age, Rosewood Courts' solid brick construction has so far escaped irreparable damage. Even HACA Executive Vice President Sylvia Blanco acknowledges that Rosewood Courts "is not falling down around us, it's not dilapidated."<sup>317</sup> The housing authority could put "a Band-Aid on the property" by maintaining the existing units, but Blanco argues that would be unfair to residents "who do not have basic,

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<sup>316</sup> It is important to note that the CNI program was begun during President Barack Obama's administration. President Donald Trump's new administration and new Secretary of HUD (Dr. Ben Carson) will determine the CNI program's future and how much federal funding it will receive, hence affecting whether HACA will receive an Implementation Grant to put its Rosewood Transformation Plan into action.

<sup>317</sup> Tuma, "Living History."

modern amenities that most of us take for granted.”<sup>318</sup> Blanco suggests that HACA has two choices for Rosewood’s future: either demolition or temporary repairs for long-established issues. She excludes, however, the possibility of rehabilitation. The existing Rosewood Courts can be updated to provide modern living standards that would improve residents’ living conditions, mitigate the Courts’ existing problems, and preserve an ever-relevant historic site.

As defined by *The Secretary of the Interior’s Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties*, the standards for best preservation practices, rehabilitation refers to modifying an original historic property for updated or similar use through alterations or additions while, at the same time, saving significant architectural, cultural, or historical features.<sup>319</sup> A local architecture firm recently affirmed rehabilitation as the most appropriate course of action for Rosewood Courts because it allows for “the greatest flexibility to achieve the goals of this project.”<sup>320</sup> Developed in the spirit of compromise between HACA, the City of Austin, and preservation organizations such as Preservation Austin and Mid Tex Mod, h+uo architects’ Preservation Economic Feasibility Assessment of Rosewood Courts (January 2017) made a clear case that the complex could, and should, be successfully rehabilitated. In addition to outlining the Courts’ historic treatment, the Feasibility Assessment listed strategies and cost estimates for retrofitting the property to fit modern code regulations, thereby addressing HACA and residents’ expressed concerns regarding insulation, central heating and air, and walls on

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<sup>318</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>319</sup> “Rehabilitation as a Treatment and Standards for Rehabilitation,” Technical Preservation Services, accessed May 30, 2017, <https://www.nps.gov/tps/standards/four-treatments/treatment-rehabilitation.htm>.

<sup>320</sup> h+uo architects, *Rosewood Courts Preservation Economic Feasibility Assessment*, 14.

which to hang pictures. The redesigns of the existing units' floor plans, which resembled those included in HACA's Transformation Plan, offer a workable option for Rosewood Courts' renovation that would satisfy HACA, preservationist groups, and residents' wishes. While fixing the existing Courts would cost HACA money and the loss of available bedroom units, the Feasibility Assessment shows that Rosewood's rehabilitation could simultaneously accomplish HACA's goals of bettering living conditions and allay preservationists' concerns by "keeping the historic nature of the buildings intact," making National Register listing possible.<sup>321</sup> Rehabilitation offers a feasible approach for the Courts' revitalization and weakens HACA's argument for demolition as Rosewood's best option.

The proposal's major drawback is that the plan includes fewer than 124 units, which means that HACA would need to build more dwellings on or near the property to accommodate all of Rosewood's current tenants. More significantly, this addition would signal HACA's commitment to the public housing as an institution, contradicting HUD's current approach to the program's contemporary design and makeup. If HUD was solely focused on improving residents' living conditions, physical rehabilitation and upgrades would represent a logical solution. Instead, programs like HOPE VI and CNI embody HUD's pursuit of its "development agenda," which uses demolition to remake city neighborhoods and consequently "downsize the public housing program[']s" place in the urban landscape.<sup>322</sup>

Though this recent Preservation Economic Feasibility Assessment supports rehabilitation as a reasonable and appropriate approach to Rosewood Courts, the City of

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<sup>321</sup> *Ibid.*, iii, 37.

<sup>322</sup> Goetz, *New Deal Ruins*, 181, 184.

Austin and local preservation groups face difficulty in garnering support for the cause in a city whose booming growth and serious housing demands render its general population ambivalent to preservation in general.<sup>323</sup> Austin exhibits an overall poor record in saving historic places associated with the city's ever-decreasing Black population, which declined 5.4 percent from 2000 to 2010.<sup>324</sup> Most recent efforts to commemorate areas of the city's Black history arose in response to racial conflict. For instance, in 2007, Austin City Council approved the creation of the African American Cultural Heritage District (AACHD) in East Austin. Texas's lone African-American cultural district emerged after a number of "high-profile shootings and accusations of excessive [police] force" in 2005.<sup>325</sup> The AACHD's boundaries mirror those of Austin's "Negro District," formalized by the 1928 Koch and Fowler Plan. In using the "Negro District's" outline, the AACHD transformed these borders, born of discriminatory urban planning, into celebratory markers of East Austin's vibrant history and identity. Six Square, the organization that operates the AACHD and advocates for Austin's Black history, supports Rosewood Courts' preservation and inclusion on the National Register. The group's former Executive Director Lisa Byrd noted that Austin's past policies have "dismantled [the area's] African-American culture" and resulted in the city's "hemorrhaging Black people."<sup>326</sup> "From our point of view," she added

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<sup>323</sup> Cindy Winder, "Protect and Preserve," *Austin Chronicle*, July 24, 2015, accessed February 15, 2017, <http://www.austinchronicle.com/news/2015-07-24/protect-and-preserve/>.

<sup>324</sup> Corrie Maclaggan, "Feeling 'Invisible,' Black Residents Leave Austin," *The Texas Tribune*, July 18, 2014, accessed April 15, 2017, <https://www.texastribune.org/2014/07/18/african-american-austin/>.

<sup>325</sup> Winder, "Protect and Preserve."

<sup>326</sup> *Ibid.*

Stop the cultural genocide, and then we'll have a place to have that conversation. Stop knocking down or selling off; stop all the policies, from redevelopment to gentrification, all those policies that have literally destroyed this community. In terms of the built environment, there's little to nothing left.<sup>327</sup>

Rosewood Courts' demolition and reconstruction would, in the words of Councilwoman Houston, mark a "blow to the history of Black East Austin."<sup>328</sup> Though the housing authority developed its Transformation Plan out of purported concern for property's residents and their wellbeing, HACA has not fully considered the ramifications of its destructive redevelopment policies on the area's history or its residents' short-term living situations, even remarking that "it would be premature to create a relocation plan before" finalizing the property's redevelopment.<sup>329</sup> HACA's conciliatory offer to maintain specific preservation units stemmed from self-interest. In presenting this compromise as a way to honor Rosewood's historic importance, HACA hoped to mollify preservationist concerns and therefore have the freedom to pursue its mixed-income housing model. Conversely, saving only a portion of the site would forever dismiss the original Courts' relevance in contemporary Austin. Any remaining original structures would be treated as static artifacts unconnected to East Austin's quickly-changing social, economic, and physical landscape. By destroying any or all of this property, HACA would simultaneously build over Austin's Black history and accelerate public housing's undoing.

The loss of Rosewood Courts would exacerbate the City of Austin's inadequacy in preserving historic sites associated with its African-American community. This limited

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<sup>327</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>328</sup> Tuma, "Living History."

<sup>329</sup> "Frequently Asked Questions," *The Rosewood Report*, December 2013, accessed April 15, 2017, <https://rosewoodchoice.files.wordpress.com/2012/12/2013-12-the-rosewood-report-vol-1-iss-2.pdf>.

representation speaks to Austin's repeated failures in honoring its Black heritage as well as the overall lack of diversity within the national preservation field. Traditionally, preservationists have prioritized sites and buildings of the highest architectural or social echelon, meaning those associated with the white elite and classical styles. This ethnocentric interpretation neglects to accurately represent American history and instead perpetuates a biased narrative that has habitually disregarded the contributions and very presence of non-white groups. In the past, preservationists and SHPOs delegitimized Black vernacular architecture or African-American architects and often questioned Black heritage sites' historical or cultural significance. Texan architect Everett L. Fly charges that the preservation field's ingrained preference for white history has consistently "undervalued and disrespected" Black history and its stewards, leading to the field's struggles in both recruiting more non-white participants and saving sites associated with marginalized racial and social groups.<sup>330</sup>

Legal scholar Michael deHaven Newsom documents how this heritage "hobby of middle- and upper-class whites" affected Black residents living in newly-desirable urban real estate.<sup>331</sup> Writing in 1971, Newsom criticizes preservationists for too often ignoring the tangible effects of their conservation efforts on local Black communities. Much like in East Austin, Washington D.C.'s Georgetown neighborhood hosted a thriving Black community for close to one hundred years. Yet in the 1950s, real estate brokers and

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<sup>330</sup> Everett L. Fly, "Historic Preservation Diversity in Practice and Stewardship," in *Bending the Future: Fifty Ideas for the Next Fifty Years of Historic Preservation in the United States*, ed. Max Page and Marla R. Miller (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2016), 83–85.

<sup>331</sup> Michael deHaven Newsom, "Blacks and Historic Preservation," *Law and Contemporary Problems*, 36, no. 3, Historic Preservation (Summer 1971): 431, accessed February 15, 2017, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1191063>.

preservationists bought out and rehabilitated Black families' homes to attract upper-class, white families drawn by the area's history and charming architecture. Austin and other American cities have experienced their own versions of this "Georgetown syndrome," which Newsom labels as another "form of Negro displacement."<sup>332</sup> Along with narrowing where African Americans, who already have the fewest housing options, can live, this type of historic preservation provides yet another opportunity for whites to decide the trajectory of Black lives, especially as related to housing. Newsom's analysis of Georgetown's revitalization recalls the housing experiences of Austin's Black community and, as such, underscores the need for preservationists' sensitive consideration when dealing with historic places and Black communities.<sup>333</sup>

Preservation's tense relationship with race and class politics continues today. As preservationist Ned Kaufman argues, historic sites and other heritage spaces are governed by and "inextricably entwined with issues of race, diversity," and social inequality.<sup>334</sup> To Kaufman, most people have little ability to shape their environment's future because few powerful actors, such as government agencies, hold inordinate imperialist power in ordering change, whether welcomed or not.<sup>335</sup> The story of East Austin's development typifies this social injustice, as policies such as the Koch and Fowler Plan, mortgage redlining, segregated complexes' living conditions, and now gentrification have continually subjected African-American and Mexican-American residents to zoning and construction practices out of their control. Now presented with an opportunity to divert

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<sup>332</sup> Newsom, "Blacks and Historic Preservation," 423.

<sup>333</sup> *Ibid.*, 423–424.

<sup>334</sup> Ned Kaufman, *Race, Place, and Story: Essays on the Past and Future of Historic Preservation* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 8.

<sup>335</sup> Kaufman, *Race, Place, and Story*, 32–33.

from the area's troublesome legacy of discrimination, HACA and the City of Austin's plans for Rosewood Courts' prospective reinvention must continue to actively include tenants' input as well as a fair, balanced consideration of every option, from demolition and reconstruction to preservation and rehabilitation, to ensure all residents exercise their rights and have a well-informed say in their homes' future.

Because Rosewood Courts still serves as public housing, its longstanding physical presence contributes a sense of history and authenticity to its rapidly-changing surrounding neighborhood and city. As a part of East Austin's landscape, the Courts attest to the area's community character and, as expressed by sociologist Melinda Milligan, represent a tangible "tie to [the neighborhood's] past."<sup>336</sup> The Courts' design and layout reflect the earliest conceptions of America's first federally-funded public housing program, thus symbolizing New Deal politics and the era's attitudes towards housing and government assistance. Rosewood Courts' very existence, attributed to Lyndon B. Johnson's avid support, is itself "inherently significant and worthy of preservation" due to its long-established presence and ongoing importance in the local community's daily life.<sup>337</sup> To remove the complex would mean covering up the city's history, disrupting the neighborhood's daily rhythms, and advancing East Austin's gentrification and disappearing identity.

Rosewood Courts also captures Austin's dark history, when public housing's initial optimism clashed with the City's segregation policies. This history should have no bearing on residents' living conditions and experiences in today's Courts. Though some

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<sup>336</sup> Melinda J. Milligan, "Buildings as History: The Place of Collective Memory in the Study of Historic Preservation," *Symbolic Interaction*, 4, no. 1 (Winter 2007): 106.

<sup>337</sup> Milligan, "Buildings as History," 120.

may argue that such a racist legacy merits Rosewood’s removal, the buildings’ physical presence can help make having difficult conversations easier, especially when discussing controversial topics such as race, segregation, and discrimination. We cannot, and should not, “paint the past ‘simpler times’” and deny the segregatory intent that informed Rosewood Courts’ and other East Austin public housing complexes’ locations and creations.<sup>338</sup> This crucial detail reflects the historical context in which such places were created and reveals the era’s thinking about who deserves housing, where they should be housed, and the ways in which they should be housed. Rosewood Courts’ rehabilitation can remember this history while rectifying it and truly fulfill the USHA public housing program’s original purpose.

#### V. Conclusion: The Case for Saving Rosewood Courts

Public housing encompasses but a small segment of the over 90,000 properties included on the National Register of Historic Places.<sup>339</sup> As of 2008, the National Register listed only fifteen of more than six hundred federally-funded public housing projects (built between 1933 and 1949), with Austin’s Santa Rita Courts as the most recent addition.<sup>340</sup> Santa Rita’s place on the National Register proves that Rosewood Courts’ preservation is possible, as HACA has previously cooperated with local preservationists to save its public housing and make it livable according to modern standards. Why was Santa Rita Courts saved and Rosewood Courts sacrificed? People point to different actors and reasons, but ultimately HACA’s receipt of the Choice Neighborhoods Planning Grant

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<sup>338</sup> Kaufman, *Race, Place, and Story*, 85.

<sup>339</sup> “Research,” National Register of Historic Places Program, last modified September 2015, accessed May 18, 2017, <https://www.nps.gov/nr/research/>.

<sup>340</sup> Paul R. Lusignan, Judith Robison, Laura Bobeczko, and Jeffrey Shrimpton, “Public Housing in the United States, 1933–1949,” National Register of Historic Places Multiple Property Documentation Form (Washington, D.C.: National Park Service, 2004), 70.

opened the door for Rosewood's drastic overhaul. HACA used these funds to develop a plan that may never come to fruition, at least as how the housing authority originally envisioned, because future funding was, and is still, not guaranteed.

Given the dearth of historic public housing properties across the nation, Rosewood Courts, the first USHA-funded African-American project in the country, must be saved. Rosewood Courts' layout physically embodies the cultural values of 1930s America as interpreted through the New Deal's notion of collective responsibility. In a relatively rare moment in American political life, the federal government believed in assisting the unfortunate and thus promoted policies that helped those Americans access the benefits of citizenship in whatever ways possible. As one of those programs, public housing represented a revolutionary idea that succeeded in eliminating slums and elevating the working class's immediate environment and, presumably, future opportunities. Rosewood Courts symbolizes public housing at a moment when it truly worked, as HACA's assistance helped East Austin's low-income residents move closer to achieving America's prescribed domestic satisfaction.

The complex's creation also speaks to a time in American history when the federal government pursued its quest for universal decent housing while prioritizing its segregationist policies. Born of this ideological tension, Rosewood Courts reveals how those in power interpreted the worth and addressed the needs of the country's most marginalized populations. In Austin, HACA successfully used these projects to rebrand East Austin's undesirable locations into something worth coveting by African Americans forced to live in the city's "Negro District."

Rosewood Courts addresses another aspect of public housing history: its

residents. As home to hundreds of families for nearly eight decades, Rosewood Courts shaped the lives of those who occupied the units throughout public housing's different phases and Austin's transformation from a small, sleepy city to booming hi-tech metropolis. These tenants created lives of dignity and agency in an atmosphere governed by antiquated paternalism and inequity. In looking at the experiences of African-American residents in complexes like Rosewood Courts and Booker T. Washington Terrace, we see how these activist occupants organized and advocated for themselves while navigating challenges posed by HACA's mismanagement and the City of Austin's discriminatory policies. By nature of their residences and participation in East Austin's community, these tenants encompass a significant portion of Austin's Black history. To demolish Rosewood Courts would jeopardize the legacy of its past occupants along with the future of its current tenants.

Rosewood Courts' preservation represents a chance for Austin to properly value its African-American community and its history. The City of Austin must change its behavior of initiating preservation policies from a reactionary standpoint and instead proactively turn the tide of destruction that compromises most local African-American historical resources. Luckily, certain groups like Six Square and Preservation Austin advocate on behalf of these vernacular structures, places, and stories, but widespread preservation is not guaranteed until the City of Austin and its affiliates alter their approaches to honoring local Black history.

Along with its historic value, Rosewood Courts provides much-needed public housing for the city, thereby proving this New Deal-era project's modern relevance in a landscape dominated by gentrification and high-cost construction. The Preservation

Economic Feasibility Assessment shows that the project's existing structures can be modified to create more comfortable living spaces that fulfill residents' needs while continuing to serve Austin in its original capacity. Eradicating Rosewood Courts would mistakenly equate the public housing concept with failure. The program didn't fail because of its intentions or its theory; it suffered because of shortsighted legislation, incompetent and discriminatory housing authorities, and wider economic and social changes that transformed American society throughout the twentieth century. The realities of other housing authorities' similar operations suggest that Rosewood Courts' demolition and mixed-income replacement would displace its current tenants and disrupt their lives for negligible benefits. Ultimately, Rosewood's destruction would represent yet another episode in HACA's well-established pattern of neglecting their tenants' welfare.

Given Rosewood Courts' importance in the national public housing program and in the history of Austin's African-American community, Councilwoman Ora Houston's characterization of the project as "a national treasure; it's a Texas treasure; and it is an Austin treasure" rings true.<sup>341</sup> Since its 1939 creation, the project has continually witnessed the tensions between changing state functions and attitudes towards low-income families, the nation's evolving public housing program, and the actual experiences of those living in these federally-funded spaces. Rosewood Courts' uncontested historic significance merits its preservation, for its unique place in the story of Austin's and America's public housing stands apart from existing scholarship by

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<sup>341</sup> Lizzie Jespersen, "Whither Rosewood Courts?" *The Austin Chronicle*, January 31, 2014, accessed February 15, 2017, <http://www.austinchronicle.com/news/2014-01-31/whither-rosewood-courts/>.

showing how the USHA program developed on a smaller scale in less populous urban areas. Its rehabilitation would reinvigorate its long-standing role of housing its residents and representing their community. It is long overdue for HACA and the City of Austin to commit to saving these historically-significant spaces and return to a time when local governments, housing authorities, and the general public supported providing clean, decent housing for all.



Figure 10: Rosewood Courts, 2017. Photo by Lindsey Waldenberg.

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