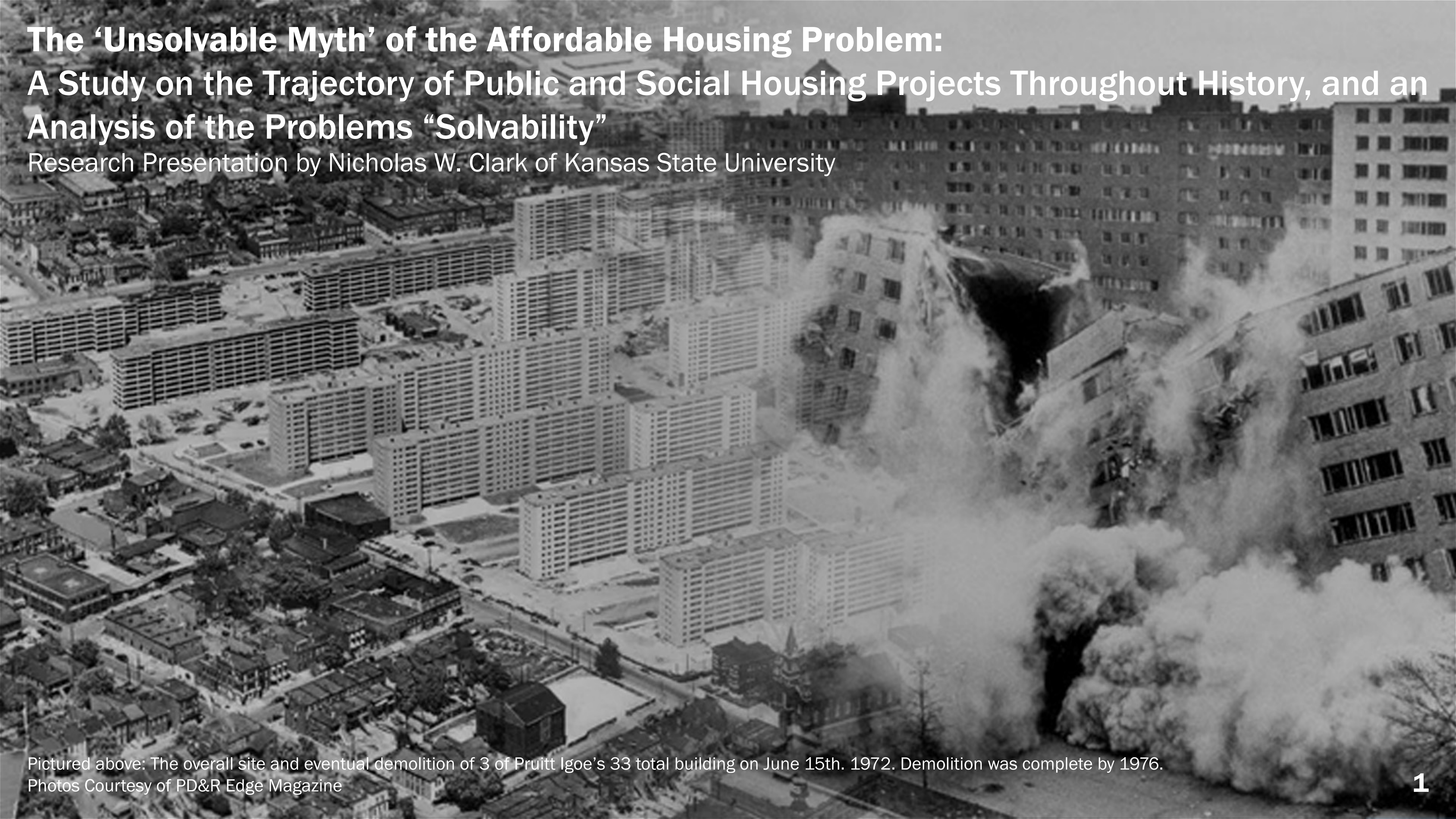


# The 'Unsolvable Myth' of the Affordable Housing Problem: A Study on the Trajectory of Public and Social Housing Projects Throughout History, and an Analysis of the Problems "Solvability"

Research Presentation by Nicholas W. Clark of Kansas State University



Pictured above: The overall site and eventual demolition of 3 of Pruitt Igoe's 33 total building on June 15th. 1972. Demolition was complete by 1976.

Photos Courtesy of PD&R Edge Magazine



# Abstract

A study of the history of the housing problem in the United States, this presentation outlines 3 key chapters in that history to outline a trajectory of the issue. Beginning with the **'Infamous Failures'** following World War II, **the question is first asked whether these projects failed due to architectural issues or issues of discriminatory policy.** In this section the damage of how these failed projects were portrayed becomes evident. Moving a few decades forward, a **'Shift in Trajectory'** is identified as the Hope VI Project put forward by the Clinton Administration has unforeseen impacts on what kind of housing projects become prevalent throughout the country. The public consciousness moves away from large scale public and social housing for **an incentivised preference towards gentrification.** Finally, **the modern zeitgeist is examined** as a product of this trajectory painting **'A Hopeful Future'** of private high-density multi-family affordable housing projects and truly successful, reinvigorated public housing initiatives put forward by **more social justice minded housing administrations.**



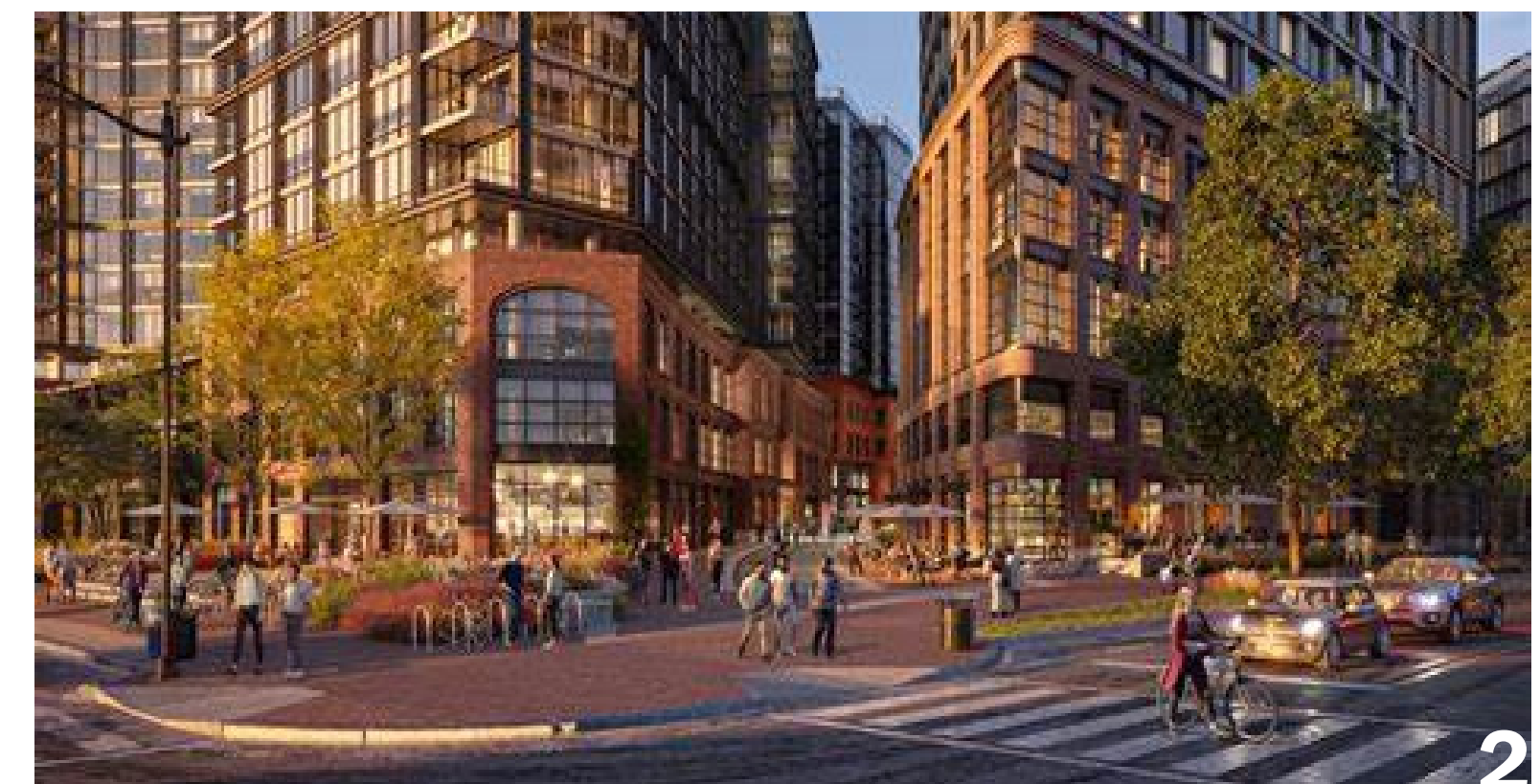
An aerial shot of St. Clair Village in 1955. (Photo courtesy of the Allegheny Conference on Community Development Photographs, Deter Library & Archives, Heinz History Center)



A protest at the Cabrini-Green demolition site, Nov. 6, 1995. (The Chicago Sun-Times collection, Chicago History Museum)

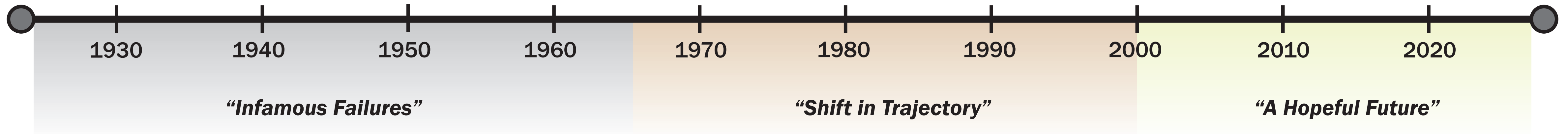
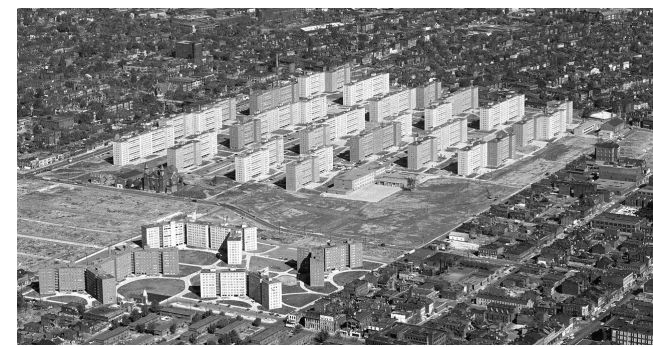
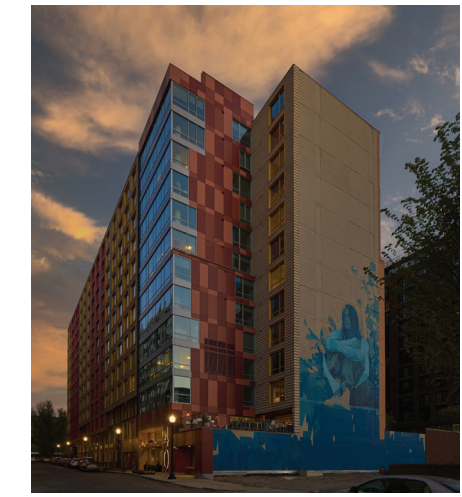


Robert R. Taylor Homes, Chicago, 1988 (Photo by Camilo J. Vergara, Courtesy Library of Congress (2014648586))

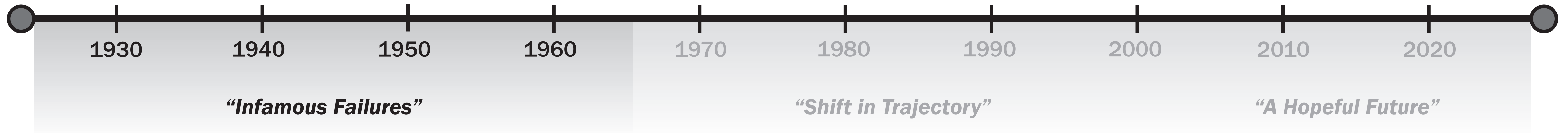
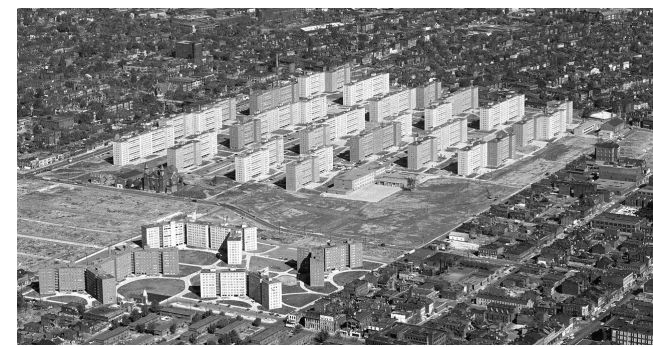


Entry Corridor of The Stacks in Washington DC (Photo Courtesy of thestacks.com)











# Post WWII Social Housing: *St. Clair Village*

“Infamous Failures” 1

One of the notable early housing projects in the 1900’s U.S. is **St. Clair Village** in Pittsburgh, PA. St. Clair Village was in operation in Pittsburgh from **1955-2010** and during that time “**Black residents were limited to 30 percent of units even if there were vacancies** in the units reserved for white residents. The Housing Authority had difficulty filling these vacant units and received tremendous opposition from white residents. **More than 400 white families withdrew their applications**, citing opposition to integration” (Public Source). St. Clair Village made a lot of the same mistakes as other notable early housing developments to be covered in this presentation. The difference being that, racial tension came both from white residents and housing decisions that were being made on the basis of race by the Housing Authority. **Racial discrimination hindered the project on multiple fronts**, leading to it’s eventually failure as a development. Here we see that the obstacle in the way of ending homelessness is not a problem of the architecture, but **a problem of discrimination and restrictive policy.**



An aerial shot of St. Clair Village in 1955. (Photo courtesy of the Allegheny Conference on Community Development Photographs, Deter Library & Archives, Heinz History Center)



An aerial shot of St. Clair Village Parks in 1967. (Photo courtesy of the Allegheny Conference on Community Development Photographs, Deter Library & Archives, Heinz History Center)



A shot of St. Clair Village in 1959. (Photo courtesy of the Allegheny Conference on Community Development Photographs, Deter Library & Archives, Heinz History Center)



An overhead shot of St. Clair Village in 1957. (Photo courtesy of the Allegheny Conference on Community Development Photographs, Deter Library & Archives, Heinz History Center)



## Post WWII Social Housing: *Cabrini Green*

Chicago, Illinois endeavored to remedy the housing problem themselves in the Cabrini-Green Neighborhood. Cabrini-Green Homes, spanning over a longer period of time than the prior case study, was **a housing initiative built in 10 sections over 20 years** and was subjected to the ebbs and flows of American social housing sensibilities from **1962-1995**. While having some similar problems to what plagued Pruitt-Igoe, Cabrini-Green lasted long enough to be impacted to the ill-fated HOPE VI policy initiative put forward by Bill Clinton, which spelled the beginning of the end for Cabrini-Green. Given the longer run of Cabrini-Green, in its history the development was more **publicly advocated for by its residents.**

The tension between the public and the government centered around the project’s potential redevelopment, and it’s inevitable demolition. The HOPE VI Program **promised to be a reinvestment** into the housing projects that had become dilapidated over the course of the last several decades. HOPE VI ended up placing an emphasis on private development and gentrification over the large scale public projects of the 50s and 60s.



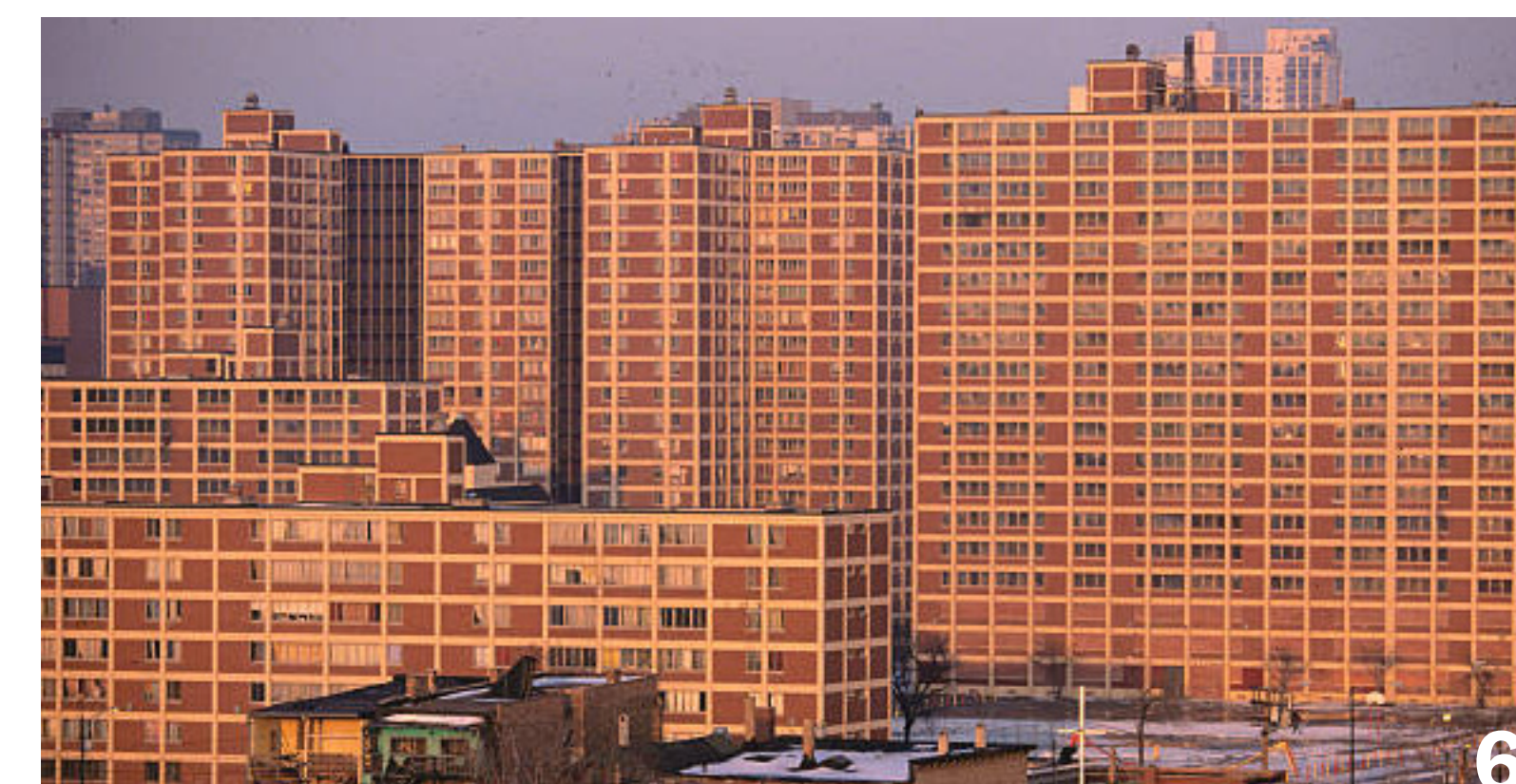
Aerial View of Cabrini-Green site, Nov. 7, 1995. (The Chicago Sun-Times collection, Chicago History Museum)



Aerial View of Cabrini-Green site, Oct. 13, 1976. (The Chicago Sun-Times collection, Chicago History Museum)



A protest at the Cabrini-Green demolition site, Nov. 6, 1995. (The Chicago Sun-Times collection, Chicago History Museum)



View of Cabrini-Green building facades, Aug. 8, 1993. (The Chicago Sun-Times collection, Chicago History Museum)





Family residents overlooking Pruitt-Igoe courtyards, Sept, 1967. Photo Courtesy of PD&R Edge Magazine



Aerial view of Pruitt-Igoe site, Oct. 11, 1964. Photo Courtesy of PD&R Edge Magazine

## A Dangerous Narrative: *Pruitt-Igoe*

In **1951**, St. Louis, Missouri became another metropolitan city poised to tackle large scale public housing with ambition and promise. **The 33 eleven-story building project promised a clean, safe, and well-kempt environment** for those who had previously been banished to the slums of the urban core of St. Louis. In reality; however, it did not take long for this promise to feel empty to both the projects residents, and the broader St. Louis community.

In the time since the failure of Pruitt Igoe, the St. Louis Housing Authority had **pinned the failure on the residents being 'unfit' for the social requirements of 'High-Rise living'**. Other important voices of the time labeled the project as the great failure of Modern Architecture, as a vehicle to condemn the design style that didn't have much to do with the true reasons for the projects' downfall.

“Infamous Failures” 3



View of Pruitt-Igoe courtyards, Aug. 21, 1964. Photo Courtesy of PD&R Edge Magazine





The demolition of 3 of Pruitt Igoe's 33 total building on June 15th, 1972. Demolition was complete by 1976. Photo Courtesy of PD&R Edge Magazine

## The Truth of The Failure: *Pruitt-Igoe*

“Infamous Failures” 4

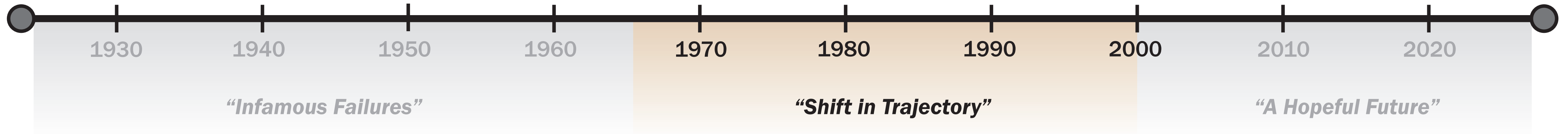
By 1960, only 5 years after the final Pruitt Igoe building was complete, **a lack of funding, discriminatory racially motivated policy, and a vulnerable resident population** created a culture of dilapidated violence that terrorized the low-income woman and children. By **July 1972 the projects were condemned** by the St. Louis Housing Authority and demolition began.

The clearer and more nuanced picture of Pruitt Igoe's failure is an image of systematic discrimination, a lack of foresight with regard to maintenance funding, and a general disregard for the well-being of the population the project was attempting to help. Nevertheless, the narrative was crafted such that the public remained convinced that the failure was the fault of the residents until the release of 'The Pruitt-Igoe Myth' in 2012 by Chad Friedrich. **The documentary sets the record straight** through a series of personal interviews with the residents of the projects themselves, and exists today as the primary source of information on the development.



Pruitt-Igoe Architect Minoru Yamasaki, Photo Courtesy of PD&R Edge Magazine







## Misguided Policy: *Hope IV & Robert R. Taylor Homes*

Robert R. Taylor Homes in Chicago is known for having been the most ambitious public housing initiative in the world with **4,349 units** holding a total of **27,000 people at it's height in 1965**. Constructed from **1959-1963** the project named after Robert Rochon Taylor (the first black chairman of the Chicago Housing Authority in 1942.) was a part of a massive federal urban renewal program **to eliminate slum neighborhoods**. While the name of the homes are after a pioneer of racial equality, it had precisely the opposite impact on the African American residents by relocating much of the pre-existing poverty and racial isolation the community was already experiencing. The development removed families from needed social services and the location of the buildings encouraged an increase in crime. **Robert R. Taylor Homes serves as a reminder** that even though some projects began to see success in the later decades of the 1900's, Public Housing remained a typology **hindered by discriminatory policy and poor socio-economic policy**.



Robert R. Taylor Homes, Chicago, 1990 (Photo by Camilo J. Vergara, Courtesy Library of Congress (2014648586))



Robert R. Taylor Homes, Chicago, 1967 (Courtesy Library of Congress (2014648586))



Robert R. Taylor Homes, Chicago, 1988 (Photo by Camilo J. Vergara, Courtesy Library of Congress (2014648586))



# A Suburban Example: Yessler Terrace

Yessler Terrace, **completed in 1941**, was Seattle, Washington's first public housing development and was also the first racially integrated housing development in U.S. History. **The site contains 561 residential units** distributed among **68 two-story row house buildings**. As a result Yessler Terrace takes on a much different visual profile from many of the previous case studies, appearing more suburban in contrast with the tall high-rise developments of New York, St. Louis, Pittsburg, and Chicago. Yessler Terrace is also one of the few developments looked at thus far that **is still providing housing to more than 1,100 residents**. Infact, a 1.7 billion dollar redevelopment initiative began in 2013 and is anticipated to be complete in 2028. (Seattle Housing Authority)

Yessler Terrace and Boulevard Garden serve as evidence to the notion that with enough investment and care from the community, **large scale successful public housing initiatives are completely possible** and obtainable for metropolitan communities.



South facade of Yessler Terrace Housing (Photo Courtesy of Lawton Gowey)



Single House of Yessler Terrace with Family Outside (Photo Courtesy of Lawton Gowey)



Street view of Housing in Yessler Terrace (Photo Courtesy of Lawton Gowey)



The rear or south facade of 717 Washington can be found in this detail of a panorama taken from the roof of the Marine Hospital on Beacon Hill. (Photo Courtesy of Lawton Gowey)



Close up view of Housing in Yessler Terrace (Photo Courtesy of Lawton Gowey)

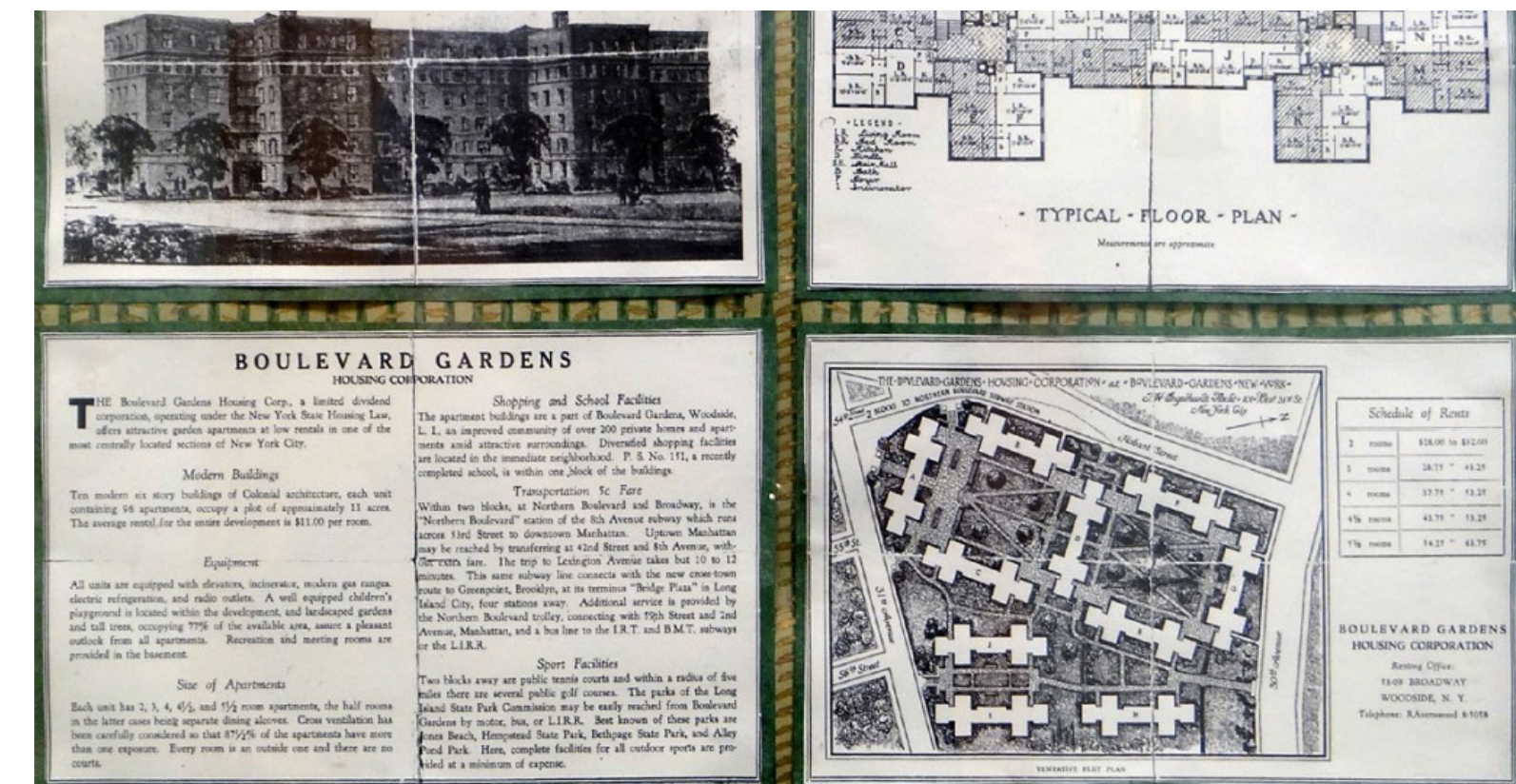


# An Outlier of Success: *Boulevard Gardens*

“Shift in Trajectory” 3

The Boulevard Gardens complex built in **Woodside, Queens in 1935** is a development that stands in evidence to the success achievable by affordable housing initiatives when not bogged down by misguided racial and socio-cultural policy. The Boulevard Gardens Housing Corporation was able to report after just 3 months that it’s low-rent model tenements with **an average monthly rent of 11\$ per room had all been leased** (Karnik). The following year the New York State Board of Housing mandated that the complex prioritize low-income family residents by **barring residents whose income was five times that of their annual rent and Boulevard Gardens reserved their housing accommodation accordingly.**

**In 1987 Boulevard Gardens transitioned out of being a low-income family residence to providing co-ops for shareholders but its 52 years as an affordable housing initiative** serve as a lesson for future endeavors into remediating the Housing Crisis.



Initial Advertisement posters of the Boulevard Gardens (Photo Courtesy of Apartments.com)



Aerial view of the Boulevard Gardens complex (Photo Courtesy of Apartments.com)



South Facade and Fire Stair of the Boulevard Gardens complex (Photo Courtesy of Apartments.com)



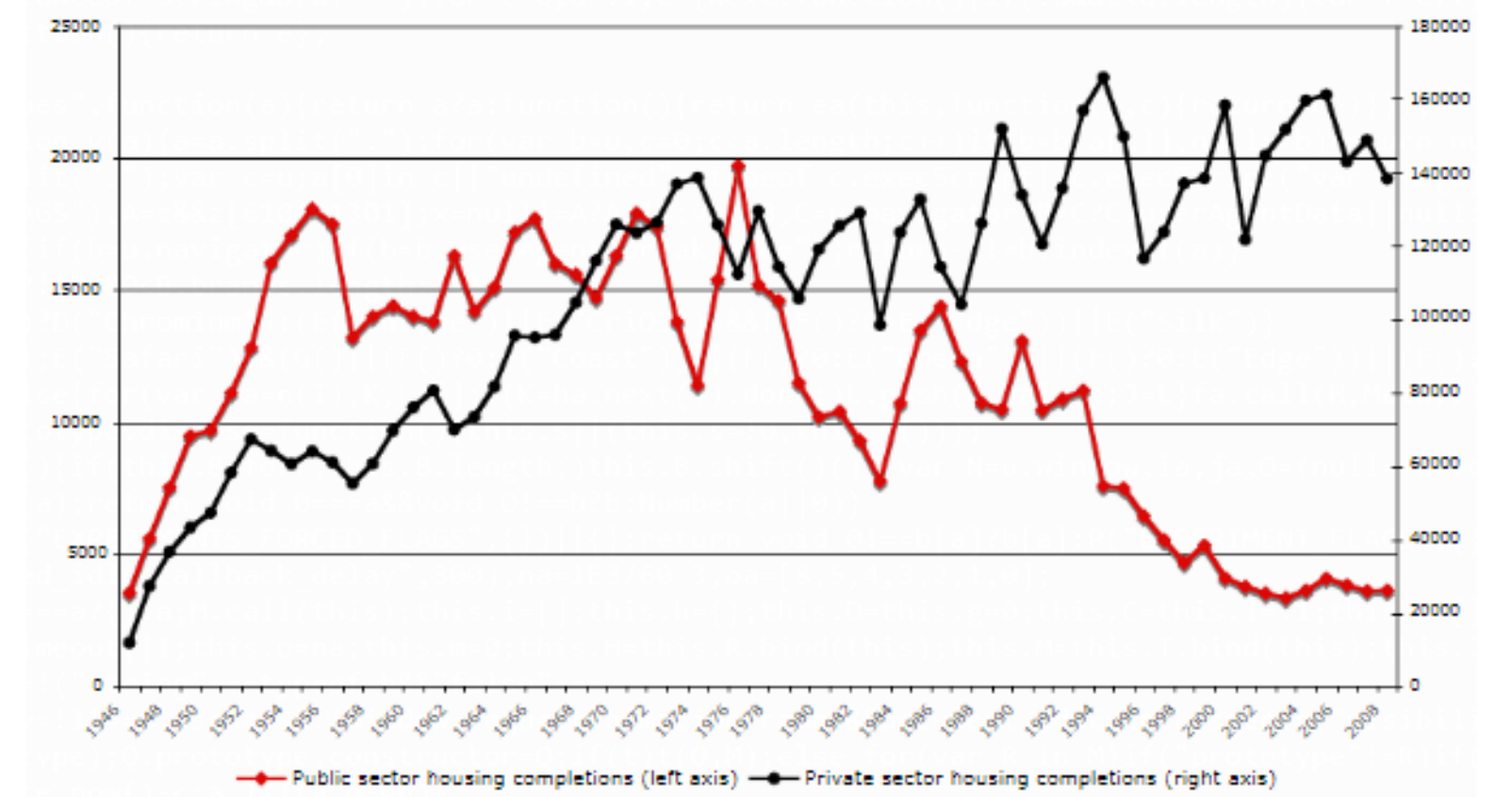
Entry view of the Boulevard Gardens complex (Photo Courtesy of Apartments.com)



# Shifting to the Private Sector

“Shift in Trajectory” 4

The trend of **more private affordable housing projects being constructed than public housing projects** in the United States since the 1930s reflects a significant shift in housing policy and development strategies. While **public housing initiatives**, exemplified by projects like Robert R Taylor Homes and Cabrini Green, were initially implemented to address housing shortages and urban decay, they **often faced issues such as poor maintenance, social isolation, and a concentration of poverty**. Developments like Boulevard Gardens represent a departure from the large-scale, government-led initiatives, emphasizing a **mix of public and private collaboration**. Private projects often incorporate innovative design, community engagement, and a diversified approach to financing, enabling a **more sustainable and inclusive model for affordable housing**. This shift underscores a recognition that the success of affordable housing lies not only in its provision but in creating holistic, well-integrated communities that uplift residents and contribute positively to the urban fabric.



Trends of Public and Private Housing Development 1946-2008

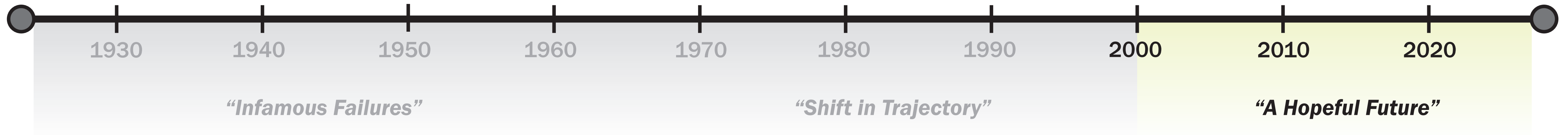
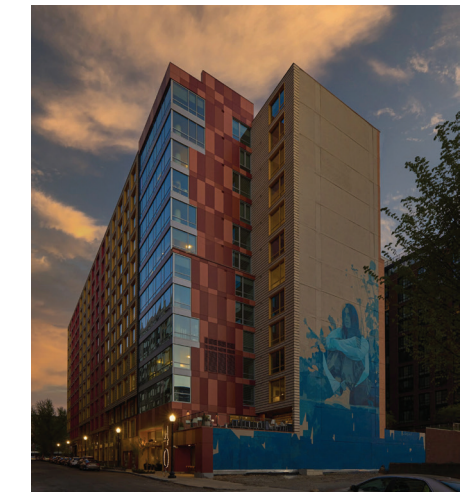


SoNYa Apartment Complex (Photo Courtesy of SoNYa.com)



'House as Garden' by Micheal Sorkin (Photo Courtesy of Stirworld.com)







## A Broader Scope: *Unite d' Habitation*

Unite d' Habitation, designed by Le Corbusier and **completed in 1952 in Marseille, France**, stands as a successful housing project due to its groundbreaking approach to urban living. The project prioritizes efficient use of space, functional design, and communal amenities, providing a harmonious blend of residential and social elements that **revolutionized modern architecture and urban planning.**

Le Corbusier for all that he contributed to Modern Architecture, was **a proponent of the concept of 'mass housing.'** a notion certainly borrowed from in projects covered previously. Mass Housing, as Corbusier saw it, was **an effective way to inclusively remedy the Housing Crisis** with an efficient and successful vigor. Unite d' Habitation in Mersailles, France is one such example of this vision. From his standpoint outside the U.S., Corbusier was able to avoid some of the discriminatory turmoil present in the states when Unite d' Habitation was constructed. As such, Corbusier was able to create a housing project that is **still effectively serving it's purpose to this day.**



Facade of Unite d' Habitation by Le Corbusier (Photo Courtesy of Le Corbusier Foundation)



Corner view of Unite d' Habitation by Le Corbusier (Photo Courtesy of Le Corbusier Foundation)



# Lessons to Learn: *Via Verde*

"A Hopeful Future" 2

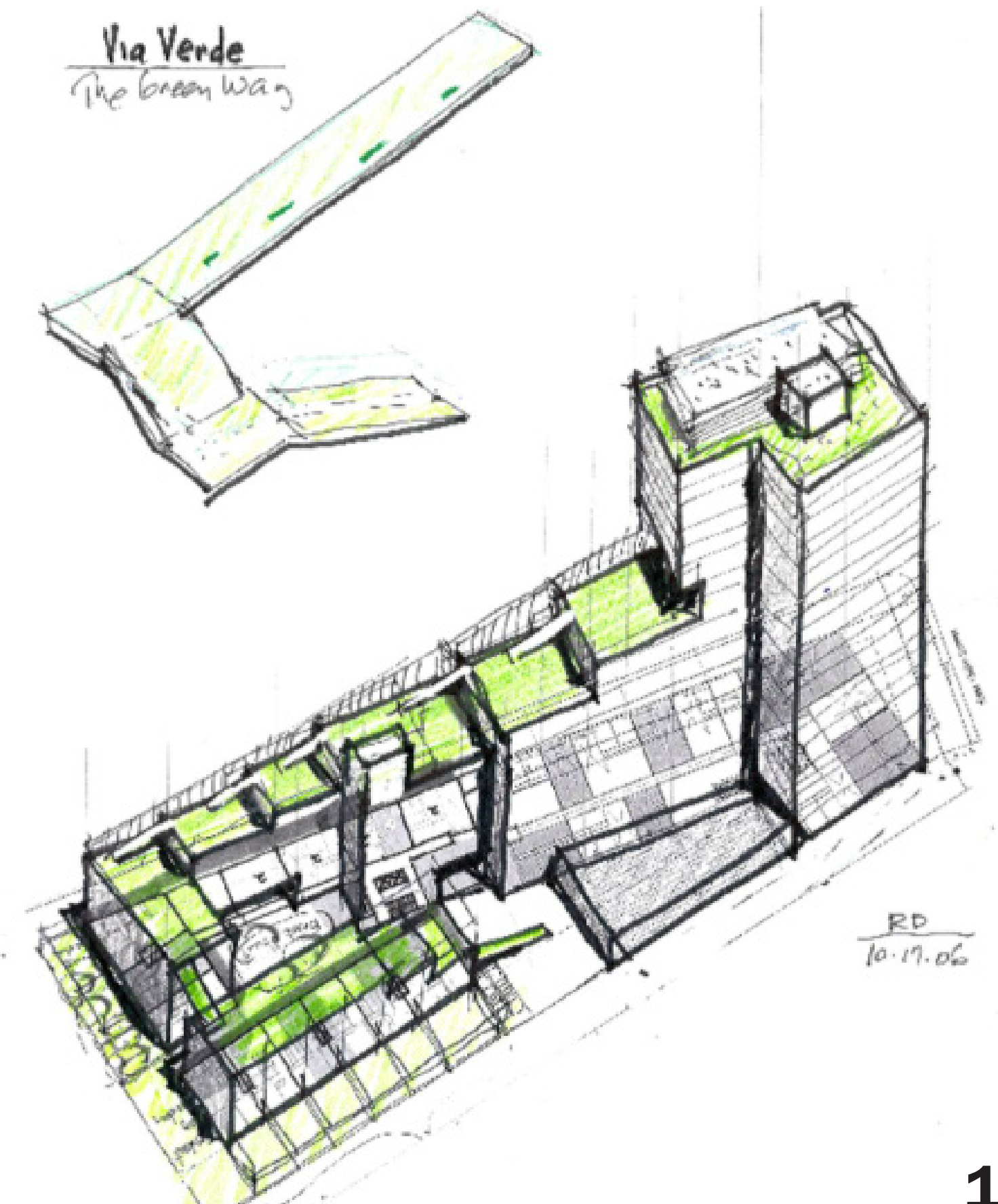
**Via Verde**, a pioneering housing project in the Bronx, stands as a testament to innovative urban development and community-centered design. **Developed by Jonathan Rose Companies and Phipps Houses**, Via Verde successfully marries sustainable architecture with a commitment to fostering a vibrant, healthy community. The project, **completed in 2012**, comprises **a mix of affordable and market-rate housing units**, featuring community gardens, and a range of energy-efficient technologies. The developers employed a philosophy centered on **creating a holistic living experience**, recognizing that affordable housing should not only be about shelter but also about enhancing residents' quality of life. Via Verde's emphasis on community engagement is reflected in its design, with communal spaces, fitness amenities, and outdoor areas, fostering a sense of belonging among residents. This project has been celebrated for not only **providing much-needed affordable housing** but also for its dedication to sustainable, community-driven development in an urban context, setting a **noteworthy example** for future endeavors in housing.



Aerial View of Via Verde by Jonathan Rose Companies (Photo Courtesy of Dattner Architects)



Side Facade Rendering of Via Verde by Jonathan Rose Companies (Photo Courtesy of Dattner Architects)



Green Roof Diagram of Via Verde by Jonathan Rose Companies (Photo Courtesy of Dattner Architects)



# Contemporary Projects: *The Stacks*

"A Hopeful Future" 3

The Stacks in Washington D.C. elucidate what that future might be. **Breaking ground May 19th of 2022**, The Stacks promise to be a development familiar to the urban fabric of D.C. but altogether different. Designed with an emphasis towards **outdoor green spaces, economic inclusion, and short enough buildings to let natural light wash the ground inbetween**, this kind of development could very well be the future of providing homes to the unhoused. While it remains difficult to know what the outcome of such a development may be when it has not yet finished construction, the forecast is an optimistic one. The Stacks, along with other contemporary projects can help to inform our discussion on **how the Housing Crisis ought to be tackled today and what architectural principles make for a successful project.**



Redering of the towers of The Stacks (Photo Courtesy of Thestacks.com)



Ground level rendering of The Stacks (Photo Courtesy of Thestacks.com)



Interior Redering of The Stacks (Photo Courtesy of Thestacks.com)



Redering of the entry corridor of The Stacks (Photo Courtesy of Thestacks.com)



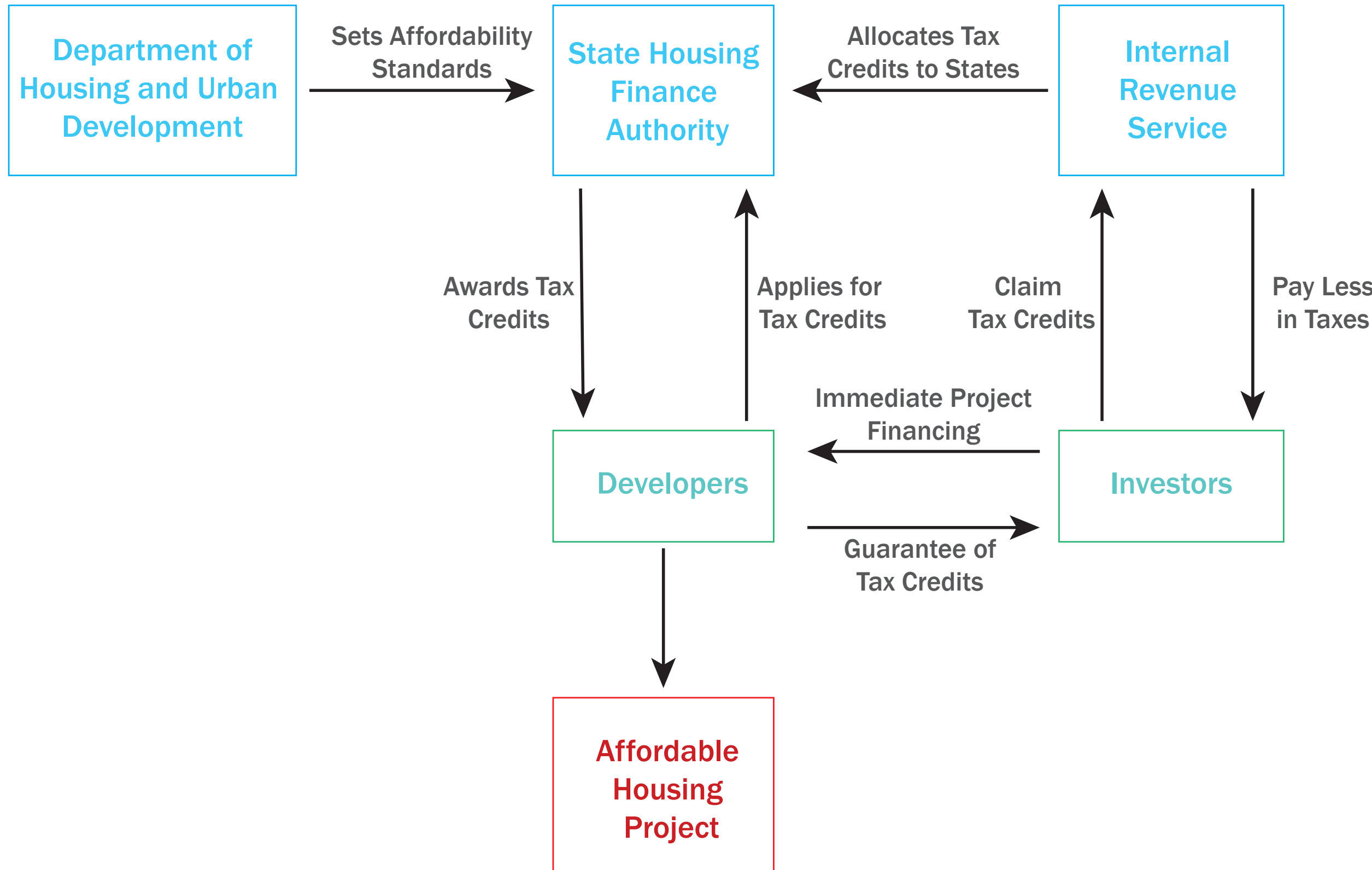
# Tax Incentives and the Modern Conditions

As Affordable Housing Developments become more common within the zeitgeist of contemporary architectural practice, it becomes imperative to study not only successful precedents, but also the incentives and reasoning behind why developers might be prioritizing these kinds of projects in the private sector. The DC 2023 **Low Income Housing Tax Credit Qualified Allocation Plan** has played a **pivotal role in bolstering the completion of affordable housing projects** in the city, significantly impacting the broader landscape of the US Housing Crisis. By strategically allocating tax credits to developers committed to low-income housing initiatives, the plan has **incentivized the construction of affordable units**, addressing the pressing demand for accessible housing options in the nation's capital. This targeted approach has not only increased the frequency of completed projects but also fostered partnerships between the public and private sectors, creating a more collaborative and streamlined process for affordable housing development. As a result, **the DC model serves as a potential blueprint for other municipalities grappling with similar housing challenges**, demonstrating how targeted financial incentives can be instrumental in accelerating progress towards alleviating the nationwide housing crisis.



View of New York City Housing Development (Photo Courtesy of www.financialservicesperspectives.com)

Structure of Low-Income Housing Tax Credit



Low-Income Housing Tax Credit Diagram Made by Author



# What's The Way Forward?

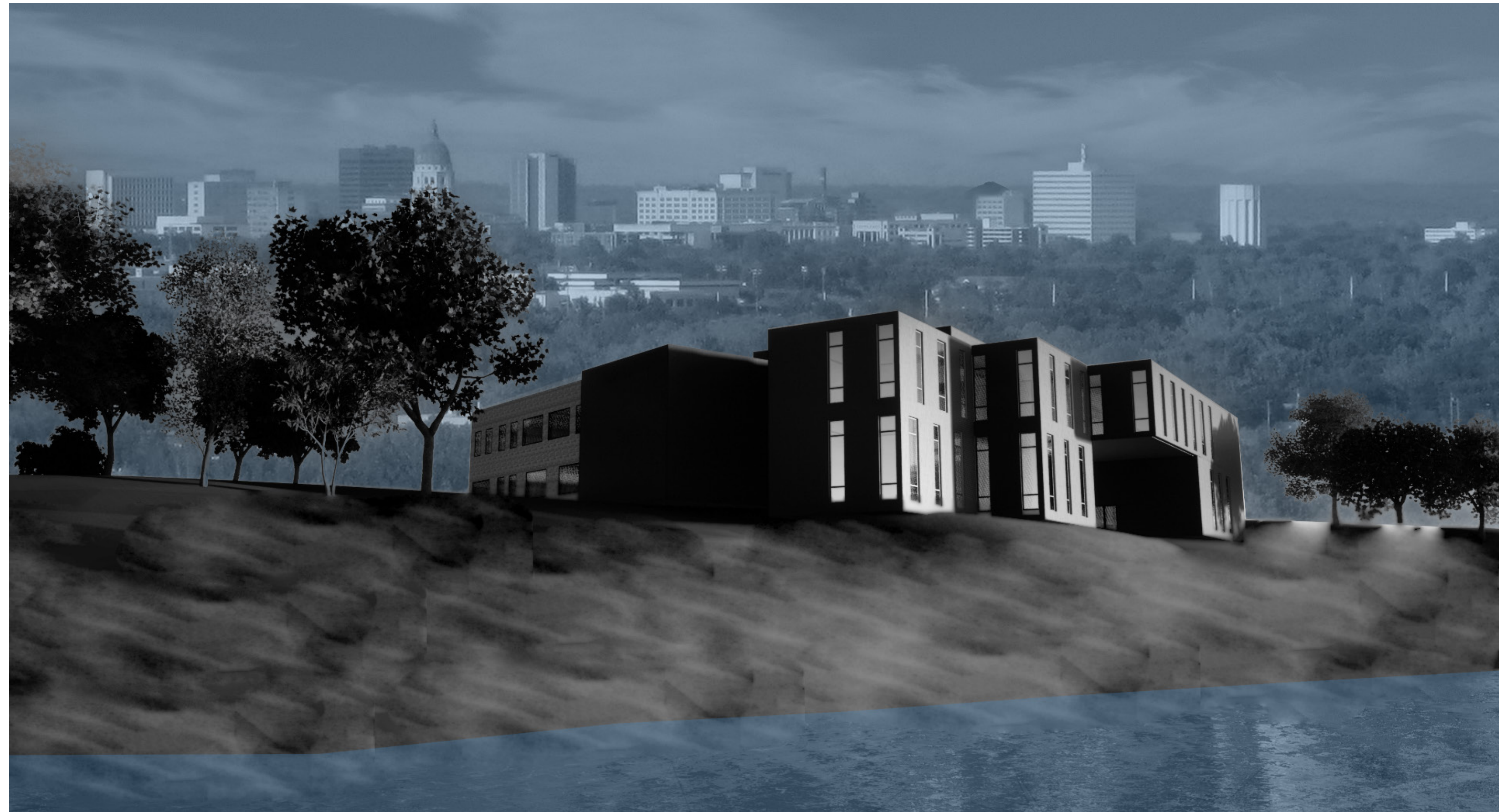
To conclude, having conducted an analysis across a historical trajectory of housing projects both in the United States and internationally, it has become obvious that the housing crisis is a crisis with a **solution that can be achieved**. How that can be done appears to be a **collaboration between makers of policy, local and federal housing authorities, and the architectural profession**. Policy makers and housing authorities can start by undoing the damage done by a century and a half of discriminatory zoning and economic policy and housing through the reinvestment into and redevelopment of dilapidated communities and neighborhoods. **This first step will not be accomplished easily however, as it will take advocacy, and measures to ensure accountability for the makers of policy and housing authorities by members of the architectural profession.**

As mentioned earlier, it is imperative to the solution of the Housing Crisis, that **architects and designers alike work together** to encourage the development of inclusive policy and zoning regulations so that **the design of spaces that benefit the human condition and create a livable standard for the lower class** can even be possible.





Headshot of Author (Photo courtesy of KGD Architecture)



Rendering from recent studio project completed by author in Fall of 2023

## Meet the Author

Hailing from Kansas State University and the Chapter President of the KSU AIAS Chapter, Nicholas Clark is in the middle of his 3rd year of the 5 year non-baccalaureate Architectural Masters Program. Additionally, He has obtained a Leadership Studies Minor, and is also in the process of obtaining a Business Minor at Kansas State. He expects to graduate from KSU in Spring 2026 and has aspirations to serve in some capacity on the National Board of the AIAS shortly after completing his degree. His passions and curiosities expand across subjects such as Philosophy, Leadership, Urban Politics, and of course, Affordable Housing Architecture. The paper this presentation is based on comes from a final project in *ARCH254: History of Contemporary Architecture*. After completing the paper for the purposes of the course in the Spring of 2023, he went on to develop and transform the work further during his time as an Architectural Intern at KGD Architecture in the Summer of 2023.

He would like to thank Emma Tuttle and Prof. Kory Beighle at Kansas State University, and Principle Tom Donaghy at KGD for their encouragement and guidance over the course of conducting this research.





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Pictured above: The overall site and eventual demolition of 3 of Pruitt Igoe's 33 total building on June 15th. 1972. Demolition was complete by 1976.

Photos Courtesy of PD&R Edge Magazine