The Public Buys a Ghetto
— As Chicago "Redevelops"

FACED WITH A GROWING POPULATION, a serious housing shortage, the worst, most segregated Negro slum of any major northern metropolis, and deterioration of most housing units, Chicago is a city with a serious crisis. And yet at present it seems totally unprepared to cope with it, having no plans which even take cognizance of these major facts of its existence.

At best it moves around the fringes of the question, making grandiose plans to solve peripheral problems, frequently aggravating the major ones in the process. In this category go the many plans for highway reconstruction and improved commercial downtown facilities. And, unfortunately, the federally-aided program for urban renewal and redevelopment has fallen into this classification also.

Chicago's first experiment with urban renewal is the famous Hyde Park-Kenwood Urban Renewal Plan. This Plan has been labelled a "noble experiment," a "pioneering" attempt at "interracial living," and an "exciting precedent" for urban refurbishing. In actual fact, however, it is a tragic example of the misuse of 28 million dollars of Federal funds, which at best will help one community at the expense of the rest of the city.

Housing for the Un-Needy

At a time when the city faces a housing shortage, particularly acute for Negroes and low-income families, Hyde Park and Kenwood propose to demolish 6 thousand housing units (actually considerably more if one includes the several other unrelated projects sponsored by the University in the same area), presumably reducing the total number of available units by about one third. The housing units to be demolished are largely the residences of Negroes and low income families. The units to be built on the vacated land will rent at $45 a room and up or sell at $20-45,000.

No public housing is presently projected for the area (although considerable public housing is planned for the surrounding all-Negro high-density areas). Over one thousand of the families to be displaced are eligible for and desire public housing. Even the inadequate proposals originally suggested by the planners were removed at later stages of the Plan's development. A compromise 120 units has been "recommended" by the City Council after considerable public demand. Thus "victory" (assuming the recommendation is followed) for public housing amounts to less than 1 percent of the total housing projected for the area, and half of it is specified as housing for the aged.

None of the presently proposed units are specifically planned as subsidized middle-income housing. Vague "promises" have been made that after the Plan is approved the developers might possibly arrange with the Chicago Dwelling Association or co-operatives for middle-income projects; but attempts to get guarantees have been unsuccessful.

Thus the total units available are to be reduced, without provision for public or middle income housing, and without provision that relocation be conducted in such a way as not to cause further deterioration and concentration of minorities elsewhere in the city.

Outlined in this way surely the Plan sounds nakedly antisocial. In fact, it seems at a glance hard to understand how such a proposal could be subsidized at the taxpayer's expense. Surely this Plan must have met with the outraged protest of the more enlightened and liberal sentiment in the community and the city! Surely none can ignore the fact that when the city's crucial problem is the miserable and segregated living conditions under which its 800,000 Negroes (one-fourth of the city) live, to reduce the units available to them is criminal negligence! Especially when the only other city planning in progress consists of redevelopment schemes for other areas of the city which will further reduce the units available to Negroes and low and middle-income families!

The Plan has in fact produced opposition. Opponents include the Chicago CIO which raised the demand for city-wide planning prior to any redevelopment so that those displaced would not add to the problems of the rest of the city. The Chicago Urban League in a carefully documented report noted that present urban renewal schemes will further the concentration of Negroes and the deterioration of living conditions available to them. The Chicago NAACP asked for three major changes: more public housing, middle income housing and a sounder relocation program. The community groups neighboring on Hyde Park and Kenwood warned that as presently envisioned the Plan would create insoluble problems for them, as displaced persons moved north and south into already overcrowded Woodlawn and Oakland. The local IVI (Illinois section of ADA) raised its voice in protest and a small community organization was formed expressly to oppose the plan. Strongest of all, the Catholic Archdiocese, represented by the outspoken Msgr. Egan, outlined the shortsightedness of this type of planning and urged its rejection or alteration to meet the needs of the entire city. Its Jim Crow character and its economic bias was demonstrated. In the City Council hearings, Msgr. chided the Plan's real estate proponents and the "well known businessmen, who stand to make a good profit through the Hide Park plan," with the following insightful comments:

> You do not want public housing in Hyde Park-Kenwood. You say that kind of housing will shake investor confidence, by which you mean you will not issue the pre-requisite mortgage. You say that public housing saps initiative and weakens the moral fibres of independent action which have made this country great. Now let me ask you this. When the government sells you this land at a loss to itself, when the government issues and even buys the mortgage from you so that you make your profit without risking loss, is your initiative sapped? Are our moral fibres weakened? . . . The public will grow increasingly impatient with the proposition that sound business procedures requires their dwelling in mire. Then indeed you will have a socialism which will take more than the sap of your initiative from you.

That the University of Chicago, located in Hyde Park, the major south side Chicago realtors, and out-right racists should support the plan is logical. What is more surprising is that the considerable intellectual, liberal and even semi-radical community which centers in this area appeared, particularly at first, solidly behind the Plan, and uniformly hostile to all criticism.

The "Liberals'" Logic

The most outspoken civil liberties and civil rights leaders either came out in support of the Plan or retreated in silence. The Community's religious, civic and cultural leaders all applauded enthusiastically and looked bewildered at the reaction of the NAACP, Urban League and CIO. Many of the community leaders developed a "persecution" complex, and reacted as though the opposition to the Plan was based on some devious plot by unnamed "reactionary" forces, and unfair hypocritical "utopians." All criticism was seen as "playing into the hands" of these invidious forces.

The one-mile area concerned, located near the Lake on the southside of Chicago, has during the past ten to fifteen years, become an "interracial" community—that is it has been "invaded" by the growing Negro ghetto which surrounds it. Up until 1948 it met these threats with the restrictive covenant. In 1948 this was ruled unconstitutional by the Supreme Court. Since then the University of Chicago has desperately sought other means of protecting its property and institution. For as the Ghetto expands, with it expands the miserable conditions of ghetto existence. These include overcrowding, doubling and tripling-up, poor upkeep of facilities by both tenants, landlords and city officials, decreased city services, disease, juvenile delinquency, latent hostility and community apathy. These are the costs of ghetto life, of restricted choice of dwelling place by Negroes, of a shortage of housing, of the low-income status of Chicago's Negroes, of the segregated educational system existing in Chicago, of the cultural deprivation of the Negro community, and of the whole vicious cycle of conditions which aggravate and reproduce what is so well-known to and so disliked by all students of modern urbania.

The community's "liberals" are proud that they have not fled, that they were willing to remain "and fight it out." They expect, in return, a reward.

The community's "liberals" argue that at worst this is "economic segregation," not racial segregation. They ignore the facts. In reality the two are inter-related since the average income of Chicago's Negroes is almost half that of its white population. It's a stratagem worthy of Southern racists in their attempts to find subtler means of maintaining school segregation. Besides, when has it become an accepted part of the liberal rhetoric to propose economic segregation, especially at the taxpayer's expense?

The community's "liberals" contend that Hyde Park-Kenwood is too crowded and have statistics to prove that there are other communities which can take care of the overload (are YOU in favor of overcrowding?) But true as this may be, it does not help the displaced Negro family to know that there are less-crowded lily-white communities in Chicago.

The fact that the two aldermen from Hyde Park and Kenwood favor open occupancy legislation does not take the community off the hook either. For until such legislation becomes a reality it is foolish to close one's eyes to the effect of every decrease in housing presently available to minority groups.

The community's "liberal" argues that too much emphasis on public housing is a mistake, since public housing ("you have to face it") brings deterioration, crime, instability, and other undesirable traits. But since he still favors public housing elsewhere ("although it's not the simple answer we 'once' thought it was"), the question must be asked, wouldn't it be better to disperse public housing in communities of "high standards" rather than large, institutionalized blocks of low-income and predominantly Negro housing within the Ghetto? For unless it is dispersed in communities of precisely the Hyde Park-type it means the concentration of all the problems inherent in such projects in precisely those neighborhhods least able to cope with them.

The community's "liberal" looks askance when one criticizes the extraordinarily generous proposals for school expansion, play lots, parking lots and street widening provided for in the present Plan. Are you against school expansion, parking space, play areas, they inquire indignantly? And how hard it is to explain that one must balance between what one "desires" and what is feasible. The question actually is, unfortunately, do we want school expansion in this area at the cost of further school crowding in the Ghetto? And the question is, should the limited school budget be used to provide benefits to this area rather than others?

Community for Whom?

The community atmosphere created by those cooperating with the Hyde Park-Kenwood Community Conference, the major community spokesman for the Plan (the other major community "backer," the South East Chicago Commission, represents more clearly the University and other "moneyed" interests) has made it difficult to examine these questions calmly. As can be seen abbve, there are two ways to pose all the arguments. Looked at from the vantage point of a middle-upper class resident of the area who identifies with the University's interests, much can be said for the Plan. But to do so one must wear blinders as to its effects elsewhere, and on other than the middle-upper class section of the community.

The decisive argument posed by the proponents of the Plan, made in desperation and anger, is the clarion call of "community democracy." ("After all, it's something we in the community worked hard on, participated together in, and communally worked out.") The Plan is cited, time and again, as a model of democratic planning. "We" were "in" on it from the beginning, we are told, making "our" needs, desires and wishes known at every stage of the development. Granted; although at least one-third of "us" (how rarely that third is thought of as being part of the community however) didn't exactly get what we wanted, but instead got booted out of the community altogether. But still, democracy cannot satisfy everyone. We must all compromise a little.

Lest we be accused of too much scoffing, let us admit readily that the Plan was remarkable in terms of the extent of participation which did exist. But still more remarkable was the illusion of participation. A vast network of participating groups were created, only a small part spontaneously. This network consisted of block groups, Conference meetings, meetings of every major community organization, detailed discussions in the community newspaper, a long, exhaustive

Community hearing before the City-appointed Conservation Community Council at which over a hundred individuals presented suggestions, criticisms, ideas. In other words everyone had his say. Of course, all this is weighted to begin with in view of the disorganization, lack of articulation and absence of identification with the community that exists among the newly arrived, transient, low-income Negro and white resident.

But just how meaningful were all these "democratic" processes? And does the word "democracy" really describe the processes in any case? Yes, if democracy means the right to be heard. No, if it means that the wishes expressed by the community have an effect upon the actual design and policy of the Plan.

Increasing the Ghetto

For despite the fact that the Hyde Park-Kenwood Community Conference, the block groups and most of the varied religious, cultural and social organizations who testified before the Conservation Community Council favored more public housing, this same Council then reduced the already inadequate proposal to zero. Despite overwhelming support for the addition of specifically-designated middle-income housing, the Council made no such recommendations. Despite the fact that most of the organizations testifying urged that guarantees be written into the plan specifying that displaced persons would not be relocated into crowded Ghetto communities, the Council made no recommendations along these lines! (In fact, so democratic were the procedures that it was only months afterwards during cross examination before the City Council that it "leaked" out that the Conservation Community Council had been divided on public housing and that a minority report had been presented urging the maintenance of some public housing.)

In other words, the final plan presented to the Federal government and to the City Council for approval bore no signs of having been affected by these criticisms and suggestions, except for uncontroversial minutiae.

After Federal approval the Plan went into its final stage—City Council approval. A renewed sense of crisis crept over the community. The local "liberal community," speaking through the Hyde Park-Kenwood Conference, urged immediate adoption without changes. The changes they insisted upon originally they now hardly referred to, suggesting that after all some of them could still be worked for after Council adoption (by pleading with the same agencies that hitherto had turned a deaf ear to them). Delay would be terrible, they cried. We must now accept the plan even in its unsatifactory state or we may have no plan at all! ("realpolitiks").

Yet the fact is that the Conference played a strange game in which it carefully backtracked away from displaying its power to alter the Plan. For there is no doubt that without their support the Plan could not be passed, could not in fact have gotten Federal approval at all. Then why, with such power in their hands, did they have to settle for a Plan which did not meet their most vital objections? Why did they retreat from pressing their point at every opportunity? Why, when they had that opportunity so rare for the liberal and academic-minded types to determine social policy, did they capitulate? The University and the realtors were desperate for some plan. They would have accepted whatever was attainable rather than have nothing at all. Far more than the individual residents, the University could not risk having nothing at all. Yet in the end the University made no compromises, and the community and its residents made all of them.

The University's dilemma is understandable. They have a large institution whose survival is at stake. With community deterioration will come parental fears, fewer student applications and decreased faculty appeal. From their standpoint they want as "safe" a community as they can get: safe from every angle. The less it runs counter to the potential biases of potential students, parents or faculty the "safer" it is. Every unit of public housing means that much greater likelihood of a problem family, that much greater likelihood of a Negro resident, that much greater possibility that some respectable white citizen will decide not to move into the neighborhood, or not to send his son or daughter to the University of Chicago. Every decreased housing unit available to non-whites means one less "risk." In other words, as long as they could "get away with it," The University saw no reason to champion proposals for housing that stood any chance of creating social problems, parental suspicions, financial risks.

Through a variety of means they were able to atomize the more critical forces in the community until late in the Plan's progress. They were able to create a swamp of confusion into which the very best minds in the community wandered aimlessly. They were aided by several weaknesses which intellectuals, liberals and the contemporary enlightened citizen are victims of. They played upon the well-known infatuation which the liberal and social scientist is prone to—adoration for planning, neat architectural plans, handsome model communities, etc. Issue after issue of the *Hyde Park Herald* was filled with maps, designs and pictures of the "community of tomorrow" filled with trees, shrubs, glassy houses, wide streets and lovely plazas. They could count also upon the recently respectable tendency of self-proclaimed liberals to boast about their self-centeredness and their selfishness.

The ultimate excuse of the Plan's proponents was that, after all, even if the Plan will not aid in solving the real housing problem facing Chicago, isn't it too much to expect that "we" Hyde Parkers be martyrs for the sake of the rest of the City. "We's done 'our share.'"

And therein lies the real tragedy. For while the city's crisis deepens, those who should be leaders in the struggle to change the pattern, have been devoting their time, energy and reputations to a plan which cannot conceivably be a pattern, a bold experiment or a pioneering project aimed at the solution to that crisis. At best it will slightly hinder the eventual solution; at worst it will set a precedent not for the breaking down of the ghetto or the increasing of our housing supply but for a rash of urban renewal projects whose effect will be the intensifying of all those problems which today beset Chicago.

DEBBIE MEIER

Debbie Meier is an active member of the Chicago NAACP.

REPRINTED FROM

anvil

FOR THE

HYDE PARK UNIT

OF THE

SOCIALIST PARTY-SOCIAL DEMOCRATIC FEDERATION

FOR ADDITIONAL COPIES

WRITE TO

SOCIALIST PARTY

400 S. STATE STREET

CHICAGO 5, ILLINOIS