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Atlanta Is Making Way for New Public Housing

By ROBBIE BROWN

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ATLANTA — In 1936, Atlanta built Techwood Homes, the nation's first housing project. By the 1990s, a greater percentage of the city's residents were living in housing projects — sprawling red-brick barracks that pockmarked the skyline — than in any other city in America.

Now, Atlanta is nearing a very different record: becoming the first major city to knock them all down. By next June, officials here plan to demolish the city's last remaining housing project, fulfilling a long and divisive campaign to reduce poverty by decentralizing it.

Mixed-income developments oriented toward families, with trendy shops, golf courses and [Y.M.C.A.](#)'s, are emerging where bleak, uniform towers once stood. Displaced residents are receiving vouchers to move to private housing. And a landmark experiment in housing the urban poor in large government-run facilities that began under the New Deal is being undone.

Over the past 15 years, Atlanta has bulldozed about 15,000 units, spread across 32 housing projects, some of which once contained as many as 2,500 residents.

“We've realized that concentrating families in poverty is very destructive,” said Renée L. Glover, the executive director of the Atlanta Housing Authority. “It's destructive to the families, the neighborhoods and the city.”

The elimination of housing projects does not mean the abandonment of public housing. The Atlanta Housing Authority pays for more residents' housing these days than it did in the 1990s. But they are scattered throughout the city in mixed-income communities and private housing financed with vouchers through the government's Section 8 program.

Still, critics of the demolitions worry about the toll on residents, who must qualify for vouchers, struggle to find affordable housing and often move to only slightly less

impoverished neighborhoods. Especially in a troubled economy, civil rights groups say, uprooting can lead to homelessness if more low-income housing is not made available. Lawsuits have been filed in many other cities, generally without success, that claim that similar relocations violate residents' civil rights and resegregate the poor.

The federal government has advocated variations of this approach for several decades, particularly since President [Bill Clinton](#) began the Hope VI program in the 1990s to disperse residents from centralized projects. Atlanta may be the furthest along, but its plans to demolish buildings, relocate residents and work with private developers to gentrify destitute neighborhoods are being mirrored across the country in cities like Chicago, Detroit, Miami and New Orleans.

Over all, 195,000 public housing units have met the wrecking ball across the country since 2006, and over 230,000 more units are scheduled for demolition, according to the [Housing and Urban Development Department](#).

Atlanta began its demolition effort in 1995 in preparation for the Olympic Games, with the encouragement of local politicians and real estate developers.

Only four of the city's housing projects remain, along with 13 smaller public housing facilities, mostly for senior citizens, that the city will continue to operate.

“Atlanta's plan signifies in a very clear way that the social contract that cities and citizens have with the poor has fundamentally changed,” said Sudhir Venkatesh, a sociologist at [Columbia University](#) who studies urban neighborhoods. “We've decided that the market can function to create housing and the role of government should be to move people into the market.”

Some researchers and policy makers say the model is succeeding. Thomas D. Boston, an economist at the [Georgia Institute of Technology](#) who has tracked Atlanta's housing-project residents since 1995, said those who move are more likely to find work, their children were likely to perform better in school and they report higher satisfaction with their living conditions.

The housing authority says the overwhelming majority of residents support the relocations. But critics say unsuspecting residents are forced into only marginally better neighborhoods. The vouchers, which usually provide families with \$568 to \$758 per month, according to the housing authority, are not available to residents with certain criminal backgrounds and are often viewed suspiciously by landlords in wealthier communities.

A large majority of displaced residents settle in 10 of Atlanta's poorest ZIP codes, according to an analysis of housing authority data by Creative Loafing, an alternative newspaper. Only about 20 percent return to their communities once the property becomes a mixed-income development, Mr. Boston said.

"Until you have alternative housing that is affordable, available and appropriate, you have no business going into these communities and destroying them," said Anita Beaty, the executive director of the Metro Atlanta Task Force for the Homeless. "To disperse these people without giving them alternatives is wrong."

The real winners, Ms. Beaty said, are business developers who make fortunes once the projects are torn down and the neighborhoods gentrify. For years, wealthier Atlantans, frustrated by long commutes, have been moving closer to their jobs downtown and, critics say, displacing poorer residents to outlying suburbs.

"Very much intertwined in all of this is the issue of race," said Deirdre Oakley, a professor of sociology at Georgia State University. "The people being affected are almost all poor African-Americans."

A similar complaint could be heard this month after the housing authority held a celebration to mark the destruction of one of its oldest housing projects, Bowen Homes.

"What were they clapping about?" asked Shirley Hightower, a former president of the tenants' association who picketed the demolition. "Clapping for a demolition? You've had generations behind generations behind generations living in this public housing. This is not a time for celebration."

Ms. Glover, the executive director of the housing authority and a former Wall Street lawyer with graduate degrees from Yale and Boston Universities, is the architect of Atlanta's public housing model. She has become well known in housing circles, hailed as visionary by supporters and condemned as ruthless by critics. Ms. Glover — along with Atlanta's mayor, [Shirley Franklin](#) — was considered by [President Obama](#) as a nominee for HUD secretary.

Ms. Glover does not blame the social engineers of the 1930s for creating housing projects. Their solution worked during the New Deal, she said, but collapsed as public housing became more racially segregated and attracted drug crime.

These days, Atlanta is again the vanguard in an experiment that Ms. Glover acknowledged could have unintended consequences. But her greater concern, she said, is that cities will safeguard the status quo.

“For us to think that a program that was conceptualized 70 years ago is still the right answer, it makes no sense,” she said. “Today is a whole new era.”