Mixed Results on Mixed-Income Chicago Public Housing

Mixed-income housing is the crown jewel of the Chicago Housing Authority. Ten years ago the agency began its billion-dollar public housing overhaul. The idea behind mixed income is to break the cycle of intergenerational poverty and unite different economic classes of people.

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A Plan for Transformation (In Photos)

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The landscape of Cabrini-Green is no longer just the tall red and white buildings in the shadow of the city's Gold Coast. A new development called Parkside of Old Town stands in the outskirts. Parkside is a careful mix of town homes and market-rate rentals salted with rental public housing units and affordable housing.

Carol Steele lives in a traditional Cabrini row-house apartment.

STEELE: This is prime area, right down the street from the lake.

Steele’s lived through this 10-year Plan for Transformation. She was here to see the dilapidation of the old Cabrini. And she’s witnessed how the neighborhood changed once traditional public housing at Cabrini was dismantled. She’s fought to make sure that former residents could be part of the new.

STEELE: Why run when from when we got new stores, new libraries, new schools? If it’s getting better, you know, then why can’t we be part of the good amenities that’s in this community?

ambi: Dominick’s

Dominick’s opened here when demographics began to shift more than 10 years ago. Longtime residents finally had access to a local grocery besides corner stores. CHA says this transformation of the Cabrini area is proof that mixed-income works. New retail follows new money moving in and everyone benefits.
It is harder for CHA to claim victory on the South Side where there are several mixed-income developments. It's true, surrounding median home values have increased there but the retail influx that Cabrini saw has not materialized.

Mixed income has not yet brought about the rejuvenation of these neighborhoods.

ambi fades

In some areas, mixed-income is facing another challenge. CHA CEO Lewis Jordan says this one is related to economics.

JORDAN: One of the bigger challenges – and not just necessarily for CHA but just in general – is the moving of market rate housing. Even in the slowing down of sales for market rate houses, we feel very, very comfortable and confident that as best we could we’ve continue to progress.

On the Near West Side, a mixed-income development called Roosevelt Square has sold its first phase of development. Some developments have had to use buyer-assistance incentives – such as hard cash – to lure homeowners.

Regardless of these challenges, the success or failure of the Plan for Transformation is destined to be part of Mayor Richard M. Daley's legacy. And that legacy is tied to Daley's father's public housing legacy—one that also started out with high hopes.

ambi: Daley at presser: this project represents the future of a great city.

Back in 1962, Daley's father, Mayor Richard J. Daley, christened a high rise public housing project on the city's South Side. It was called the Robert Taylor Homes and the CHA considered it a crown jewel. The buildings were clean with working elevators.

DALEY CONTINUES: It represents vision. It represents what all of us feel America should be – and that is a decent home for every family in every safe community.

Critics pointed out then that Taylor geographically isolated a portion of the city's black population in a constructed ghetto. Later the buildings fell into bureaucratic and physical disarray—a national symbol of the ills of public housing. When the younger Daley began tearing those buildings down a decade ago, promising to transform public housing, he also faced critics. Some still call it a political land grab. Others say it has swept low-income residents with vouchers into poor communities.

Last year on a windy day in front of Parkside, Daley expounded on his vision.

DALEY: When I said I was going to do this, most people thought that I lost my mind. Someone said why are you going to do this – it's the federal government, nothing's going to change. People don't want change there. But I said to myself when you drove through the city and public housing was on one side of the street, the other housing on the other...why is it that we always look to the other side and never look to public housing?

The Plan for Transformation was at first a five-year plan, then an ambitious 10-year plan. Now the completion date is 2015. Today much of public housing architecture looks different. But some aspects of racial isolation echo the past.

POLIKOFF: Most of these new mixed-income communities are being built in still racially segregated neighborhoods.

Alex Polikoff is with the nonprofit Business and Professional People for the Public Interest and a proponent of mixed income.

Attorney Polikoff worked on a case dating back to 1966 known as Gautreaux. The case stopped CHA and the federal housing department from building public housing in racially segregating neighborhoods. Under a judge's eye, Gautreaux continues to shape
how today's mixed-income developments are designed.

POLIKOFF: One obvious one is that you can't stick all the public housing in one section. It's got to be dispersed.

Critics of the sweeping Plan for Transformation argue that the buildings came down too fast without permanent housing options for families.

Overall, more CHA residents today are in working households and have seen their income rise. But there's not enough data yet to measure how well mixed-income families are doing. Some consistent research shows that families who moved to mixed income feel less stress in their lives.

ambi: in a mixed-income apartment

Marie used to live in Robert Taylor. She moved to the private market and two years ago got a public housing unit in the mixed-income development Legends on 43rd Street.

She doesn't want to use her last name, because she says she doesn't want any trouble with her landlord, CHA. As a renter, she still feels vulnerable to being moved out again. Marie says life for her and her five children has improved.

MARIE: Me getting a job and the apartment. I like my apartment because everything's convenient for me. I don't have to go to the Laundromat I don't have to go outside I can stay in my house and wash and do what I gotta do.

Public housing residents like Marie must go through a rigorous background check and training before they can move to mixed income. CHA says there have been 100 people who applied and didn't meet the strict criteria.

Architects of mixed income wanted families of different lots in life to mingle. Marie says that doesn't happen much with her. She prefers to stay to herself. In mixed-income developments such as Cabrini and Westhaven, there have been clear class and racial tensions.

Case Western University Professor Mark Joseph studies mixed-income communities in Chicago.

JOSEPH: The responsibility of community building and figuring out the process and voice in your own community and your own residence and having a voice made on the decisions that are made about living space ... I'd say that responsibility is a shared one. I wouldn't point the finger at one entity and say 'hey these guys aren't doing their job.'

For mixed income to truly be declared a success, Joseph says property managers will have to work harder at engineering a social transformation, too. New buildings will not erase the stigma of failed public housing, which follows former residents. The challenge of mixed income remains making sure all people in mixed income are treated equally.