How reimagining public housing with greater development can benefit low income residents.

In 2013, the New York City Housing Authority shelved its proposal to fund improvements to its housing stock by leasing undeveloped land. Shomon Shamsuddin writes that despite opposition from residents, such plans can be of great benefit to those living in public housing if they preserve existing homes, increase density and add affordable housing units.

Housing is increasingly expensive in many US cities, especially New York where the average rent for a two bedroom apartment is more than $4,000 per month. For more than 80 years, public housing has provided affordable shelter for low-income New Yorkers but the combination of aging buildings, declines in funding, unfulfilled repair orders, and questionable fiscal management have raised questions about the future of the projects. When the New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) proposed to fund needed building improvements in 2013 by leasing its undeveloped land, residents criticized the plan and it was shelved.

What happened? Let's reexamine the plan in context.

NYCHA manages a massive operation: nearly 2,500 buildings with 175,000 apartments, or one out of every 11 apartments in the city. It is the landlord for almost 400,000 people, which is approximately the population size of Miami.

But the housing authority faces severe financial pressures. Since 2001, the US Department of Housing and Urban Development has reduced NYCHA’s operating subsidies and capital funding by a combined $1.5 billion, while the city and state have completely eliminated funding for 21 developments. As of 2015, unmet capital needs (for example, repairing roofs, upgrading heating and ventilation systems, and replacing elevators) were projected to exceed $13 billion.

To address the funding shortfall, NYCHA proposed to offer 99-year ground leases on land parcels in selected public housing sites to private developers for residential construction. The basic idea is that current zoning allows for far more housing than currently exists on the sites. Housing is in high demand in New York but land is scarce so developers would pay for the opportunity to build; the revenue would help pay for public housing improvements. The plan also required that 20 percent of newly built housing units would be affordable to low-income households.

Despite the potential benefits, public housing residents opposed the plan for several reasons. The undeveloped land parcels had important social meaning and uses for residents, including playgrounds, basketball courts, baseball fields, and parking lots. These open spaces are valuable amenities, particularly in dense cities like New York.
Most of the proposed new residential buildings would literally tower over their public housing neighbors. For example, the design guidelines for the Smith Houses South Street parcel show a rendering of a proposed building that is 50 stories tall, which is more than triple the height of the existing public housing on site.

Other residents expressed fears of gentrification and eventual displacement. One tenant asked, “First the parking lots. What’s next? … Where will the poor go?” Officials also framed the plan in financial terms, which suggested NYCHA was primarily concerned with funding and fiscal deficits, while resident needs were a secondary consideration. Based on their past experience with the housing authority, residents simply did not trust officials to do what they said they would do.

However, the plan also featured some interesting and unconventional ideas for reimagining public housing:

First, the plan would preserve every public housing unit on site, in contrast with the steady decline in the overall number of public housing units around the country due to demolition and redevelopment. Baltimore, Chicago, and other cities have systematically torn down high-rise public housing structures, in part because they are notoriously associated with crime, violence, and social disorder.

Second, the plan offered a new approach to deconcentrating poverty on site by increasing residential density. The typical strategy for reducing the proportion of poor households in public housing redevelopment is to build fewer replacement units for demolished public housing and to offer vouchers to residents to permanently move elsewhere. In contrast, the plan would decrease the proportion of low-income families by bringing in market rate residents and increasing the total number of households. This approach offered the added benefits of potentially increasing local economic activity and neighborhood safety; preserving vital social networks and established community relationships; and enabling public housing residents to remain in their homes.
Third, the plan would add affordable housing units to public housing sites. Concerns about the effects of concentrated poverty have led many cities to try to locate new affordable housing away from low-income areas. The plan would not only benefit public housing residents, it would also address the broader need for affordable housing among low-income communities.

第四，计划提议创建混合收入社区，通过吸引市场房价居民来居住，以及在建筑物内混合收入。通常，公共住房再开发项目通过将低收入家庭的混合收入社区，以及将市场房价居民吸引到公共住房家庭周围，从而在建筑物内混合收入。计划设想扩大混合收入社区的规模，通过在相同地点建设市场房价住房，以便在建筑物之间也有家庭收入的混合。这类似于住房开发的常规过程，但在纽约和其他地方不同的是，市场房价住房会位于公共住房土地上。将更多市场房价居民纳入，可以提高当地商品和服务的质量，但新大楼的选址可能会导致低收入居民更加孤立于其他家庭。

尽管最初的计划被取消，但它成功地将对话从公共住房土地是否会发展转变到如何发展。最新的提议由市长比尔·德布拉西奥提出，名为NextGeneration NYCHA，将在公共住房土地上增加额外的住房开发，而这些住房开发将改变公共住房比例，使其在某些地点达到100%的可负担性，在其他地方达到50%的可负担性和50%的市场房价。

这种平衡可能在政治上更容易接受，但需要看到如果开发人员会发现它具有吸引力，并且它能产生足够的收入来解决NYCHA的财政赤字。在任何情况下，住房当局需要赢得居民的信任，因为不投资公共住房可能会太昂贵。

- This article is based on the paper, ‘Lease it or lose it? The implications of New York’s Land Lease Initiative for public housing preservation’, in Urban Studies.

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Note: This article gives the views of the authors, and not the position of USAPP– American Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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