

Howard Husock
What Happens Next – 04.03.2022

Howard Husock:

My book is about the history and future of affordable housing. There was a time when we had affordable housing and it didn't involve Federal programs. We once knew how to build homes for millions of Americans at a cost they could afford in neighborhoods that had a good quality of life.

Few examples. In Philadelphia, between 1870 and 1920, a staggering 299,000 small row homes were built. Chicago had thousands of two flats, in 1940 it had 382,000 housing units in two-, three- and four-unit homes more than all its single-family houses. Oakland, California had bungalows. 12,000 built in just three years between 1921 and 1924.

We once had the formula for low income, affordable housing, which served as the foundation for healthy communities. Bronzeville in Chicago, Black Bottom in Detroit, Dorchester in Boston, East Harlem in New York, there were poor, good neighborhoods with landlords who lived in the same buildings as their tenants with small shops, churches and synagogues nearby and the mutual aid institutions that characterize healthy communities.

We chose to demolish what were labeled slums that drove me to write my book, *The Poor Side of Town and Why We Need It*. I blame a movement that began with Jacob Riis. Very celebrated author of a book *How the Other Half Lives* about 19th Century New York housing tenements on the lower East Side. A movement that he sparked and continues blindly today. Housing reform, a movement predicated on the idea that the private market fails the poor and must be replaced by government.

Riis was a pioneer photographer who was New York's leading police reporter. He was trained as a sensationalist and his approach to housing was aimed at images that shocked.

There was more to the slums than abject poverty. Hundreds of thousands of families lived normal lives. They worked, paid rent, fed their children, had hopes and dreams for the future. And crucially poverty was not a life sentence.

Riis set off a stampede of misguided reform. He germinated the idea of public housing, as championed by two New York Women, Edith Abbott Wood of Columbia University and Catherine Bauer. Both believed that the private housing market would fail. Both would join the Roosevelt administration and Bauer would write the National Housing Act in 1937 for Federally financed public housing.

That Act would become the vehicle for slum clearance. Neighborhoods replete with small landlords, with families taking in lodgers, with single room occupancy hotels. Small shops and community institutions were swept away and replaced by The Projects. Planned communities without streets, stores or businesses. The failure and widespread demolition of public housing.

This is the 50th anniversary of the implosion of the 33 towers of the Pruitt-Igoe Housing Project in St. Louis.

None of that stopped reformers for searching for government low-income housing. Today we're told mixed income housing is the way, ignoring a fundamental question: Why shouldn't poor neighborhoods also be good neighborhoods? They were in the past. We adopted draconian zoning laws which mandate exclusively single-family districts and mandating larger lots for such homes. This is a recipe for unaffordability.

We need to relax zoning laws to permit two and three family homes, smaller shops and businesses on ground floors. We need to stop deciding for the poor where they should live based on some planner's vision of income restricted housing. Government has distorted housing markets. It should get out of the business altogether.

Jane Jacobs reminded us, it's the spontaneous plans of thousands of builders and businesses that are superior to the housing planners. We need all sides of town, a full spectrum of housing types including a poor side of town.

Larry Bernstein:

What are the societal benefits of tenants living in the same building as their landlord?

Howard Husock:

Landlords are on the front lines of creating healthy neighborhoods because they screen their tenants. We're taking steps today to make it harder to screen tenants. That's a bad thing. You make too much noise, you're out. Landlords are enforcers of social norms. Tenants make demands on landlords. It's hard to have somebody upstairs with no heat, because they're living right there.

Larry Bernstein:

The Clinton administration banned felons from public housing, is that a good idea?

Howard Husock:

We have millions of people in prisons. We have to integrate these people into the broader society. We can't continue to isolate and marginalize them. Have some commonsense rule like you kept your nose clean for two years.

Public housing's biggest problem is this. You cannot own anything there. It's all owned by the government.

We all invest in our houses. We make it impossible for poor people to do it. African Americans were particularly disadvantaged by this, because they came to the northern cities at the same time public housing was sprouting.

Larry Bernstein:

Herbert Gans wrote the book *Urban Villagers* on Boston's slum clearance. City planners knocked down an entire poor neighborhood.

How should we evaluate a community and its institutions before we blow it up?

Howard Husock:

Gans wrote the *Urban Villager* about the West End in Boston. I lived most of my life in Boston. Jane Jacobs celebrated the eyes on the street and the North End of Boston, five story walk-ups, cannoli shops on the ground floor.

The West End was the same thing. It had a certain problem though. North End was almost all Italian American. The West End was diverse: Jews, Italians, Irish, Blacks. It lacked political power. And it got in the sites of the planners and they had this mistaken idea that we have to bring the middle class back to the city and we'll do it by getting rid of this slum and we'll subsidize by giving cheap land to build middle class luxury units.

50 years later these West Enders still have reunions, because they had neighbors that they knew. They owned the buildings and rented out to extended family members. There were so many permutations available. Shops on the ground floors. They supported that parish or local synagogue. The terrible irony today is that those buildings that they tore down would be worth more than the high rises that they replaced it with. They would be historic structures. Yuppies would be renovating them. Oh, my God, tragedy of the planners.

Larry Bernstein:

Jacob Riis who took the photographs and published *How the Other Half Lives* was memorialized with the Tenement Museum on the Lower East Side of NYC. When I took the tour recently, you could see across the street that these tenements were being renovated to sell for \$3000/sqf. Density is back and it trades at a premium. Why did we push people to move to less dense areas like Brooklyn and then eventually the suburbs?

Howard Husock:

The tenement museum, they refer to it as the urban log cabin. I love this phrase. It's so meaningful to me. It's Abe Lincoln. It's the ground floor before you get to the next better neighborhood, as opposed to a life sentence and the system fails and capitalism stinks. High density living. There's no doubt that if you make it impossible to run a rooming house because it's too dense, you won't have any rooming houses and you'll have homeless guys on the street, which we have here in New York now.

Have to fight this battle, community board by community board all across this country. We have to get the idea that dense housing areas are actually desirable. They have a high walkability index.

The housing affordability formula is simple. As many units as you can have on the same amount of land, more units for the same square footage of lands. One acre zoning that's going to be an expensive house. Five 1200 square foot houses on the same lot, it's not as expensive. Levittown, the ultimate post-war suburb, derided by the socialists as little boxes. The houses were 750 square feet. That's not a garage in a lot of places and people were dying to move out of Brooklyn to get there. And they did.

Larry Bernstein:

Jane Jacobs argues in her book *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* that as office buildings age, they go from Class A to B and then to C. The type of tenants changes and the building's use does too. Is this process critical to urban vitality?

Howard Husock:

She had a line, "New ideas need old buildings."

Unfortunately, elected officials try to hold back that tide. If your whole city is becoming C class, our property tax base erodes, you need to cut taxes so that people move in. Urban dynamism, that's what Jane Jacobs was all about. Not only *Death and Life of American cities*, but her magisterial book, *The Economies of Cities*, and *Cities and the Wealth of Nations*. All three need to be read. The first was a protest. The second explained how it should be done right and what happens in healthy cities. New ideas need old buildings. We have to accept that change.

There are about 100,000 illegal basement apartments in Queens and Brooklyn today. Illegal. 100,000. You can't slap every landlord with a fine and kick out all those tenants. It's not practical. So what should you do? Change the housing code so it's safe enough rather than some higher standard that is unattainable.

We need planning and zoning boards that embrace the advent of class C from class A and then facilitate the revitalization that can finally occur. Whole cities. The Buffalos, the St.Louises, the Detroites. They all need to learn this lesson.

Larry Bernstein:

Another Jane Jacobs idea was that one reason Greenwich village works so well is because there are short blocks with small streets. If you're going from point A to point B across the village, there are dozens of street routes you can choose to make the trip, and the different routes opens up the possibility for exploring many different small businesses.

Howard Husock:

That's a zoning issue. All these suburban subdivisions that we continue to build, they have designated street widths to accommodate automobiles when more Americans want walkable neighborhoods. They also ban commercial enterprises altogether. They segregate the commercial, residential and industrial. If you look at old urban neighborhoods, there would be a commercial bakery, but then the bakery also sold day old goods on the ground floor and next door was a clothing store. And guys lived upstairs. All of that is illegal in most cities today. But in

the neighborhoods where it persisted, people are dying to move in there. We're mandating neighborhoods that people dislike. That is crazy.

Corbusier the super modernist architect who was really the force behind public modernist housing, he believed that cities should not have any streets. Literally, he said that. Cities with no streets and buildings should be placed, towers in a park. That was his phrase. And anybody who's been on public housing knows that those campuses have become free fire zones where people are afraid to walk across with good reason.

Larry Bernstein:

How long does it take for a new public housing project to turn into a disaster?

Howard Husock:

All the public housing projects look nice when they cut the ribbons. It only took 20 years from Pruitt-Igoe to go from winning architectural awards, literally, for Yamasaki, the architect, who also designed the World Trade Center to it being imploded. Everybody should look up the pictures of Pruitt-Igoe implosion. It's stunning. To replace, to this day, by nothing. Nothing. Empty land.

They radiate toxicity. There have been studies about crime, not only within public housing but within a radius of public housing. See the Wire.

Larry Bernstein:

You reference Nathan Glazer in your book, tell me why you appreciate his work.

Howard Husock:

I was privileged to know Nathan Glazer, Harvard sociology professor, somebody who would never be on a university faculty today. He was a thinker, not a statistician, and when it comes to sociology that's changed. One of his greatest books is called *The Limits of Social Policy*. And he says that any social program by its nature replaces some previous civil society arrangement, whether it was the family, the church, and has to be judged against that it replaces. And we have to be very careful and reluctant to do that. And when it comes to public housing, and Glazer himself was once a federal housing official and then he turned against all that.

He realized that institutions that were valuable and that social policy not only had limits but it had inherent weakness. His great strength was he could look at 20 studies and crystallize it in very clear and fair-minded writing.

Larry Bernstein:

When Brooklyn was settled 150 years ago, real estate developers would give land to build a church and then sell lots to parishioners in the immediate vicinity. Should we encourage mixed use like churches and other non-residential buildings next door to where people live?

Howard Husock:

The important thing, as with so many aspects of zoning and planning is not to preclude things. It's not just the market, it's private initiative. Let it take form.

It wasn't just churches. All the guys who started amusement parks at the end of transit lines understood that they were increasing the value of the land around it. Symphony Hall in Boston or Carnegie Hall in New York were built tightly into the urban fabric that developed music districts: music schools, sheet music sales places. One thing leads to another if you don't make it impossible to happen.

Larry Bernstein:

Contrast Carnegie Hall with Lincoln Center.

Howard Husock:

(Laughs).

Larry Bernstein:

To build Lincoln Center they had to knock down a dozen city blocks that had been the poor side of town.

Howard Husock:

West side of West Side Story.

Larry Bernstein:

Was replacing five story walkups with a planned modernist cultural venue a good idea?

Howard Husock:

You have that windswept open space, Government Center in Boston, the same thing. All these open spaces. They're too big and ill-defined borders. I don't think it's held up well, the grandness of the quasi-classical buildings like Carnegie Hall, Grand Central Terminal, are not matched by these modernist wannabes. It's not a terrible place, Lincoln Center, I'm not a fan.

Larry Bernstein:

How do you explain the success of fast-growing Southern cities like Houston, Atlanta, Charlotte, and Nashville?

Howard Husock:

Houston has no zoning. The Texas cities are permitting the housing market to respond to increased demand, there is a small homes movement, which is growing. Durham, North Carolina has it, Houston has it, you have closely adjacent townhouses where you can get a lot more homes on the same lot size. I hope they don't go in big for fixed rail transit. It's very expensive.

You can have other transit options, buses and maybe a surface trolley but they shouldn't be building subway systems like Los Angeles.

Larry Bernstein:

Some Southern cities are struggling like Memphis, Birmingham and New Orleans, why are these cities in trouble?

Howard Husock:

Crime is a big factor. The core responsibility of local government is to protect its population. New Orleans is not doing that. Police cities and if you don't do that, you're going to pay a price. My son lived in Clarksdale, Mississippi in the Mississippi Delta, birthplace of the blues. And he lived in a predominately Black side of town and the police took him aside when he moved there and said, "Look, if you buy a TV or something, son, don't put the box out on the street. Somebody will steal it.". How do people make investments if they think their investment is not protected? That has to do with the failure of the southern cities.

Larry Bernstein:

Raj Chetty is a very esteemed economist at Stanford and Harvard. He wrote a widely cited paper that says that poor kids who move to wealthy suburbs and attend public high schools outperform poor kids that remain in poor neighborhoods. What do you think of his research?

Howard Husock:

I've written criticizing his work. He ignores a number of things. First the practicality of it. How many people are you going to move to Scarsdale and Lake Forest? You're going to move the whole south side there, and then everything will be better? Like, I don't follow.

Number two, if you look closely at his data, boys 12 years and older didn't do as well. There's a certain sweet spot in the age range. Can you really have a federal program that says only families that fit this profile can take this opportunity? There are political impracticalities.

And then third, why can't a poor neighborhood be a good neighborhood? The failure is not the people. This is a governmental public goods failure. If the schools are bad, then the schools have to be fixed. Maybe they have to be all chartered. Maybe, voucherize them all. We have to fix the schools, not give up on making a poor neighborhood a better neighborhood. There's no practical alternative. We can't socially engineer poor people in America to live among upper middle-class people. No can do.

Larry Bernstein:

Core to the Chetty idea is that the poor will adopt the social mores of the wealthy. Is that likely? And could the wealthy adopt some of the problematic mores of the poor?

Howard Husock:

They're likely to remain in parallel universes. It's a theory that somehow these norms are going to rub off.

The settlement house model, the Boys and Girls Club model, the idea of preaching, the idea of investing in yourself, delayed gratification, I believe in middle class norms. Middle class people should dare to sell them, practice them, and preach them.

It used to be that American elites had confidence in those norms to go to Hull-House in Chicago and say, "Here's the right way to cook in a healthy way. You should really become a citizen. We'll help you learn English. Take music lessons, we'll offer them." The idea that they're going to osmose in the air if you go to Scarsdale High School, I don't think so.

Larry Bernstein:

I end each episode on a note of optimism. Howard, what are you optimistic about?

Howard Husock:

I'm optimistic that there's more communities adopting less restrictive zoning. Minneapolis abolished single family zoning. The thousands of volunteer Americans who make decisions will take in this idea that the physical environment influences our behavior and gives us different options about how to live.

Let's have a comeback of the two-family house so people can afford to buy because they rent the upstairs out to somebody else. Commonsense ideas that I hope local officials, under pressure from the electorate, will start to make better choices that's the theme of my book. *The Poor Side of Town and Why We Need It* and I believe in it.

Larry Bernstein:

You wrote an essay entitled *The Life of a House*, where you tell what happens to a residence built in the Dorchester section of Boston that evolves over time as the neighborhood changes.

Howard Husock:

Started off, a builder owner lived there with his extended family. Then it got sold to two sisters Yankee New England school teachers. Then it sold to a Swedish immigrant who subdivided it into smaller rooms and rented out the rooms.

The neighborhood became more dangerous. There was a shooting and they ended up selling it to these crazy hippies who were willing to pioneer in this tough neighborhood. And over time, their investment paid off tremendously and it still has the rental units and the family that's in there continues to rely on that income, the neighborhood is not nearly as bad.

So individual houses and their residents evolve in these fascinating ways. The key to the house's survival was that it could be subdivided and rooms could be rented, otherwise it would have been abandoned for sure. Cities, if we freeze them in place, they're going to get into trouble. That's the lesson of Jane Jacobs. That's my lesson too.