

**Mixed messages:
A brief story of Columbia Point and U.S. Public Housing**
Marie Kennedy March
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An essay to accompany Columbia Point: Life in the ghetto, USA, a video slide transfer by Linda Swartz

This place was beautiful, flowers everywhere, there were goddamn gardens all over this place. You know they used to take the flag down at night and put it up in the morning. All that's history now...

tenant in *Columbia Point*

Columbia Point [is] a burned-out, stinking, rat-infested byword for degradation and danger...

1984 statement by Ward 5 GOP Committee of Newton, a wealthy Boston suburb

The “failure of public housing” ?

Low-income public housing in the United States is widely agreed to be a failure. Many of public housing’s critics argue that the failure was inevitable—either because governments are incapable of efficiently delivering and administering housing or because high concentrations of poor people doomed the housing projects. But in the midst of the collapse of public housing, quite a few government-run, low-income housing developments continue to function well, casting doubt on the “inevitability” argument. What then makes public housing fail? The story of Boston’s Columbia Point housing project suggests some answers.

Columbia Point, with 1504 units, was Boston’s and New England’s largest public housing development. With most of its buildings boarded up for well over a decade, it has long had the sad distinction of being a nationally recognized symbol of the failure of public housing. Today, its conversion into a mostly luxury housing development is nearly complete. Linda Swartz’s *Columbia Point* gives us a glimpse into the lives of people living in Columbia Point in the years just prior to the conversion. In providing us this glimpse, *Columbia Point* suggests two insights. First, the people thrown together in Columbia Point had the qualities needed to build a vital community—if only they had been given the chance. Second, solving the problem of public housing by privatization—as at Columbia Point—simply benefits the haves without changing the plight of the have-nots.

...in whatever neighborhood or 'project' such people begin to congregate and proliferate, the only way to begin 'restoration'...is to get rid of (either by dispersal or discipline) the people who practice the kind of destructive and predatory behavior which has, up to now, destroyed all too many well-meant places like Columbia Point.

1984 statement by Ward 5 GOP Committee of Newton, a wealthy Boston suburb

Families living in public housing are commonly viewed by those not living in public housing as either helpless victims or perpetrators of the appalling conditions all too typical of public housing in the U.S. Either view leads to arguments for the elimination of public housing. That this conclusion prevails even in an era of alarmingly increasing numbers of homeless families, attests to an unusual consolidation of opinion across the political spectrum.

Broad acceptance of the "failure of public housing" certainly dovetails nicely with the free market agenda of conservatives. Under Reagan, construction of new public housing was completely halted and various attempts were made to promote the liquidation of existing public housing through a combination of demolition and sale to private owners. Jack Kemp, Bush's newly appointed director of the Department of Housing and Urban Development, promises an even more vigorous attack on public housing.

With a similar end result, liberals extol the advantages of mixed-income housing, citing the problems in public housing as if they were not the product of official neglect, but were caused by "high concentrations of poor people." The most favored "mixing formulas" never call for more than a third low-income units in any one development, with the result that conversions of existing public housing to mixed-income housing invariably result in a major loss of low-income housing. Furthermore, most proposed solutions to the "public housing problem" incorporate a view of tenants as passive objects of charity, a perspective which denies the tenants' role in creating workable public housing communities.

When I first come up, I didn't know anybody, nobody to ask for a place to stay and I guess I wanted to try and make a new start in life. My children was really little then and it looked like things wasn't going like it ought to go in Florida. So I had a lot of new hopes. I figured I could bring my kids up here and they could get a better education... it wasn't easy though, it was really hard because there were times I didn't have work and it was hard finding a job... when I did start finding jobs, it looked like the jobs was coming so fast, once I had three jobs...

Linda Swartz's *Columbia Point* offers us an unusual opportunity to see beyond the stereotypes of public housing tenants and to glimpse them as they are—various ordinary people, albeit economically poor, getting on with their lives in a tough environment, enjoying and worrying about their families, partying with their friends, caring for their children, planning for the future as best they can. Swartz paints an often intimate, but never romanticized portrait of Columbia Point. She doesn't gloss over the grinding poverty, racism and violence faced by this community, but she does allow us to see the quiet courage and dignity with which her subjects support one another and create their community every day in spite of these obstacles. *Columbia Point* portrays public housing tenants as people who *have* problems, not as people who *are* problems. The implication of this alternative view of public housing tenants for public housing policy is important. It suggests that public housing may be viable after all, as long as it is built, managed and maintained well. It suggests that perhaps poor people don't need to live with wealthier "role models" in mixed-income housing so much as they need more money and services.

The roots of the "public housing problem" in the U.S.

From its inception, the potential of public housing has been derailed by policies more dedicated to safeguarding *private* housing markets than to making public housing work. Following the example of European public housing, U.S. housing reformers originally envisioned public housing as permanent, decent, affordable working class housing. But this ideal was severely compromised from the outset. Humanitarian notions of housing the poor served to a great extent as rationalizations of a program designed to help deal with some more pressing problems of capitalism in the Great Depression—the need to control social unrest and the need to pump money back into a sagging economy.

The public housing program launched in 1937 was initially conceived as a jobs program and a way of shoring up the private construction industry. Originally, public housing was intended to house the so-called "submerged middle class"—people who were temporarily poor as a result of the Depression. It wasn't intended as housing for the very poorest families. In fact, given that rents weren't originally based on income (as they are today), but on operating costs, many families were too poor for public housing. It wasn't intended to be permanent housing, nor was it ever intended to compete with the private housing market.

From the start, federal legislation attempted to ensure that public housing would not drain any profits away from private landlords, builders and

investors. This was made explicit in several ways. Income limits for public housing eligibility were set so low that if a family could possibly afford market-rate housing, they were not allowed into public housing—quite a departure from the European model where public housing was seen as the normal choice for working class families. In addition, public housing was not to be competitive in quality with private housing. Interior design was done in a minimal way—for example, closet doors were originally forbidden. And, originally, the program was designed as a “slum clearance program”—for every unit of public housing built, another unit of housing was removed. Thus the construction of public housing did not increase the total stock of low-income housing and did not act to deflate rents in the area generally.

Both in absorbing surplus labor in the construction process and in decently housing the temporarily poor, the public housing program played a role in avoiding potential social unrest from the unemployed in the Depression period. The role of controlling social unrest continued in various forms. During World War II, public housing was used to house defense workers—many of whom had been enticed to unaffordable big cities from rural areas in order to serve the war effort. After the war, returning veterans for whom there weren’t immediately jobs were given preference for public housing units. More recently, public housing became the “dumping ground” for people displaced from their neighborhoods by urban renewal.

Production of public housing slowed during World War II as resources were diverted to the war effort. The end of the war saw a drastic need for housing for returning veterans, but, aside from some stop-gap veterans’ housing programs, Congress didn’t legislate additional public housing until 1949, and even then they preferred to subsidize private suburban development. In the glow of postwar economic expansion, public sentiment and government policy turned away from economic planning and toward free markets. In this context, political support for public housing waned.

When the federal government finally committed itself to building a limited amount of public housing it did so while bowing even more deeply to private sector agendas. Not only would public housing not compete with the private sector, the private sector would be actively subsidized. Only vacant sites not suited for private market development and already clear of any inhabitants were to be considered for public housing. In short, public housing would be used to relocate people displaced by private sector development to sites lacking the physical, economic and social support provided to earlier public housing developments by their surrounding established neighborhoods.

Public housing in Boston

Boston had one of the most vigorous public housing programs in the country and, in fact, 10% of Boston's population is still housed in public housing, a percentage just slightly lower than that of Chicago and New York. Before and after World War II, Boston's famous populist mayor, James Michael Curley, had been very pro-public housing. He saw it both as a way to house needy Boston families and as a federally subsidized benefit that could be doled out by his political machine—both public housing jobs and apartments were typically used as patronage currency in Boston. One result of this patronage system was that Boston Blacks, who were not part of Curley's machine, were largely excluded from public housing.

However, Curley's long reign came to an end in the 1950s and, with it, the favored status of public housing. Curley's populist agenda clashed with that of Boston's commercial and finance capitalists, bringing investment in Boston's downtown to a virtual halt during his tenure as mayor.

Boston business interests finally forged an alliance with parts of the Boston Irish political machines to elect John Hynes, the first of the "New Boston" mayors, in 1951. Boston soon launched one of the most vigorous urban renewal programs in the country, designed to revitalize Boston's downtown. Following national trends, public housing in Boston increasingly became a relocation resource for people displaced by public demolition for urban renewal and highways and later by gentrification linked to economic restructuring of the city that underlay the physical redevelopment of Boston. To make way for the relocatees, the federal government and local official began enforcing income guidelines more vigorously forcing higher-income tenants out of public housing. This shift to housing families displaced by urban renewal also led over time to a growing Black and Latino population in public housing.

The beginnings of Columbia Point

It is at this particular political-historical conjuncture that Columbia Point, the last and largest of Boston's family public housing projects, rose on the Boston skyline.

Built on a potentially attractive, but at that time totally isolated, 37 acre waterfront site overlooking Dorchester Bay, Columbia Point's eleven mid-rise and twelve low-rise buildings began renting in 1954. Throughout the planning and construction of Columbia Point, the public had been promised the creation of a relatively self-sufficient community, complete with stores, schools, recreational facilities, and so forth. But Columbia Point opened with no support facilities whatsoever—no bus service, poor access to different places on the peninsula itself, no churches, no schools, no stores, no recreation area and no safe beach for swimming despite proximity to the

bay. It would be eight years before the active dump on the site would be closed and then only after a child was killed by one of the dump trucks which routinely drove through the middle of the development. The first store was opened twelve years later and only now, as the conversion of Columbia Point nears completion, is the development of a beach a real possibility.

Yet, in spite of these serious deficits, a lively community developed at Columbia Point in the early years. Tenants, primarily women then as now, immediately set about organizing to get some of the things they needed to create their community. They “sat-in” at the Metropolitan Transit Authority offices and won a regular bus service. After experiencing repeated class prejudice at the nearest Catholic church, they successfully organized to get their own church built. They finally got the dump closed by blocking the passage of dump trucks with their bodies. And, they developed a myriad of both formal and informal social activities—by scouts, mothers’ clubs, softball teams, summer camps, barbecues, field trips. Parties typically flowed from one apartment to the next all through one or another of the seven story buildings.

Columbia point, predominantly white when it opened (reflective of the fact that only 5% of Boston’s population was Black in 1950 as compared with approximately 30% today), nevertheless had Black, some Latino and a few Chinese families from the beginning, but early residents remember a discrimination based more on class than race. The Point had no adjacent Black neighborhoods, and adjacent white neighborhoods were unreceptive to white and black tenants alike. While some early tenants remember occasional racial tension—emanating principally from those white tenants who had never lived with people of color before—early days were characterized by multiracial cooperation and unity.

The changing face of Columbia Point

Over the years, the population of Columbia Point changed so that by the late 1960s it was home primarily to people of color and increasingly to families which had suffered multiple displacement. Unlike other northern cities, substantial migration of people of color to Boston did not begin until the 1950s. These families, usually from the rural South and later from Puerto Rico, typically settled in areas of Boston which soon were slated for urban renewal. As documented by a recent lawsuit, from the mid-1950s until last year, the practice of the Boston Housing Authority was to deliberately segregate Boston public housing, placing families primarily by color.

Columbia Point, the most isolated of Boston's public housing developments, was slated to be a community of color. In the mid-1960s, wherever possible, white Columbia Point families were evicted, usually for being over income, or relocated to an all white project (such as the neighboring Mary Ellen McCormack) and Black and Puerto Rican families—typically those displaced by urban renewal—were routinely assigned in their place. Thus, not only was Columbia Point segregated in this era, the community was also seriously destabilized by heightened turnover and a turn toward tenants who had already been uprooted one or more times.

Public housing continued to lose political support in Boston and nationwide, and racism ensured that projects like Columbia Point were particularly poorly served. In spite of an increasingly hostile physical and social environment, tenants continued to create a viable community and Columbia Point remained fully occupied through the 1960s. As late as 1972, the Columbia Point Tenant Task Force was actively organizing to win the resources necessary to rehabilitate Columbia Point buildings for continued occupancy by public housing tenants. Their redesign of one seven story building for flexibly sized apartments (done in conjunction with architect Jan Wampler) won a prestigious international design award from *Progressive Architecture*.

The end of Columbia Point

One unexpected factor sealed Columbia Point's fate to be destroyed as a viable low-income community—the land on which it sat, that same land originally considered unusable for anything but public housing, was now becoming too valuable for poor people. By 1970, Boston had run out of large tracts of land suitable for development and the University of Massachusetts decided to locate its new campus on the Columbia Point peninsula with views of the “New Boston” skyline across the bay. The University was quickly followed by the Kennedy Library, an exposition center and the State Archives. The subway was extended to serve these new uses and to link Quincy, the next city out, to downtown Boston.

The official de-occupation of Columbia Point began in 1970. Both human services and essential city services such as police protection and garbage collection were curtailed. Even ambulances would not come into Columbia Point. As tenants who could no longer tolerate conditions moved out, their apartments were mothballed by the Housing Authority. Soon whole buildings were boarded up. For over ten years, in a city with a severe housing shortage and more than 10,000 families on the waiting list for public housing, this development stood 80% vacant.

During this period, plan after plan was floated for the redevelopment of Columbia Point into a mixed-income community. There were never provisions in these plans for more low-income families than the number who were still managing to live at Columbia Point. Nearly ten years ago, with only 350 remaining families, planning got underway for the obliteration of Columbia Point and its transformation into the new and rehabilitated Harbor Point, primarily home to the well-to-do. This conversion is nearly complete; the first market-rate tenants moved into new townhouses in the late 1988. Only 400 units of low-income housing are included in the new development so that 1100 units of public housing have been lost. Yet unprecedented public subsidies have been involved in producing this new community: \$27.3 million in initial federal and state subsidies and \$152 million in tax-exempt mortgage bonds from the Massachusetts Housing Finance Agency and \$3.5 million a year for 30 years (a total of \$105 million) in rent subsidies for the 400 low-income units. Another way of looking at this is: if the grants and rent subsidies had been simply given to the 400 low-income families, each would have gotten about \$330,000.

Lessons of Columbia Point

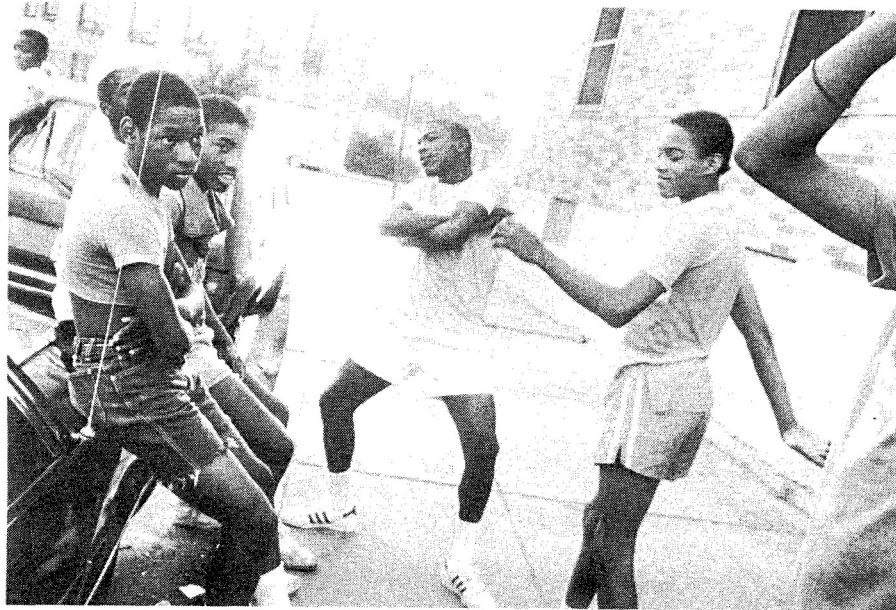
Does the fate of Columbia Point demonstrate the failure of public housing and the greater viability of private sector housing solutions? To the contrary, the story of Columbia Point—in the context of the broader history of public housing—shows how public housing was never given a chance to succeed. The goal of providing decent, affordable housing to the poor was consistently subordinated to other goals: containing unrest, priming the economic pump, clearing the poor off of land that had newly become desirable. And when the political winds changed or when the public housing sites themselves became attractive for development, public housing projects like Columbia Point were deliberately strangled by reductions in maintenance and services and the mothballing of vacant units.

In the midst of this neglect, both benign and malign, communities of public housing tenants survived and at times thrived. Even in the beleaguered Columbia Point that Linda Swartz portrays, the sparks of solidarity, concern, and the desire to make a good home are clearly visible. If decent, affordable housing were seen as a human right and not a commodity, the story of Columbia Point—and public housing across the country—would be very different.

Further reading

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This place was beautiful. There were goddamn gardens all over the place. Beautiful. You know they used to take the flag down at night and put it up in the morning. All that's history now, you know, it's ancient ...



Columbia Point

Life in the ghetto, USA
video slide transfer by Linda Swartz
©1988 26:00

COLUMBIA POINT offers an opportunity to see beyond the stereotypes of public housing tenants, (depicting) the quiet courage and dignity of residents against the overwhelming backdrop of poverty and racism.

Woody Widrow
SHELTERFORCE

COLUMBIA POINT portrays public housing tenants as people who have problems, not as people who are problems.

Marie Kennedy, Associate Professor
Center for Community Planning
University of Massachusetts

- Purchases include an accompanying essay by Marie Kennedy.
- Available on 1/2" vhs & 3/4" U-matic tapes.

As an alternative to mass media's sensationalized treatment of public housing, this intimate document of one Boston community reveals a group of ordinary people, albeit poor, getting on with their lives in a tough environment, enjoying and worrying about their friends, caring for their children, and planning for the future as best as they can.

Narrated by the people of the community, this black and white slide transfer allows viewers to face the complex and difficult social issues of life in the ghetto with a greater sense of awareness. Contains some nudity not appropriate for younger audiences.

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