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Cabrini-Green Housing Projects

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Well-known public housing development in Chicago, Illinois, with an almost entirely African American resident population. Cabrini-Green was once a model of successful public housing, but poor planning, physical deterioration, and managerial neglect, coupled with gang violence, drugs, and chronic unemployment, turned it into a national symbol of urban blight and failed housing policy. In 2000, the Chicago Housing Authority (CHA) began demolishing several Cabrini-Green buildings as part of an ambitious and controversial ten-year plan to transform all of the city's public housing projects.

The first part of what would become the vast Cabrini-Green complex was completed by the Chicago Housing Authority in 1942 to house an influx of war industry workers and returning veterans to Chicago during World War II. These were the Frances Cabrini Homes, which consisted of fifty-five two and three-story buildings on Chicago's near North Side. These apartment houses were, like other Chicago public housing of the era, considered well-built, attractive alternatives to the slums that traditionally had housed low-income families.

Things would soon begin to change, however. A turning point for Chicago public housing occurred in 1950. By that time, those most in need of affordable housing in Chicago were African Americans, whose numbers were rapidly expanding. In 1950, there were nearly 500,000 African Americans in the city, almost twice as many as just a decade before. This growth was due primarily to the northward migration of southern blacks.

The CHA and the Chicago City Council needed to decide on where to build new public housing. The CHA proposed a variety of sites, including many vacant areas bordering white neighborhoods. The city council insisted primarily on clearing already existing slums in African American neighborhoods to provide space for new buildings. After a lengthy public and racially charged debate, the city council's vision won out, an outcome that would have a dramatic impact on public housing in Chicago for the rest of the twentieth century.

Most of the new public housing that followed, built in the 1950s and 1960s under Mayor Richard J. Daley, came in the form of massive "superblocks" of highrise apartments. In 1958, right next to the old Frances Cabrini Homes, construction was completed on the

Cabrini Extension (known as the “Reds,” partly because of their red brick exteriors). The “Reds” consisted of fifteen buildings of seven, ten, and nineteen stories. In 1962, the William Green Homes (called the “Whites”) were completed. Located north and west of the Cabrini Extension, these consisted of eight white concrete buildings fifteen and sixteen stories tall.

This type of construction left many areas of Chicago with row after row of monolithic, concrete towers—artificially constructed communities cut off [p. 162 ↓] from the neighborhoods around them, forming dense geographic concentrations of poverty never before seen in American cities. The results would generally prove disastrous. The buildings themselves were often poorly built and difficult to maintain. Much harder to maintain because of the massive size of the apartment complexes and number of residents was a sense of social order and community.

In 1970, Cabrini-Green—as the entire housing project was known—became a national symbol of the deteriorating state of Chicago public housing when two police officers on patrol were killed by a sniper in one of the buildings. In the decades that followed, despite a variety of efforts to increase security, Cabrini-Green became notorious for gangs, drugs, and sensational crimes. Chicago Mayor Jane Byrne moved into Cabrini-Green for a few weeks in 1981 to show her determination to reduce crime, but it had little effect other than to draw further attention to the problem.

In 1995, after years of controversy, and in light of financial and management scandals, the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) took over the Chicago Housing Authority. Mayor Richard M. Daley, son of the former mayor, regained control of the CHA in 1999, and the agency announced a “Plan for Transformation” for Chicago's public housing. The plan calls for destroying all fifty-one of the city's high-rise project buildings by 2009 and replacing them with mixed-income developments.

These initiatives are already under way at CabriniGreen—the Cabrini Extension is in the process of being demolished, while townhouses and condominiums are being built right next door. These new homes are sold at market rate—hundreds of thousands of dollars, since Cabrini borders some of Chicago's wealthiest neighborhoods—although a percentage of them are subsidized for Cabrini residents.

The plan is celebrated in some quarters as a solution to the decades-old problems, but it has also caused a fair amount of controversy as well. Many Cabrini residents do not know where they will live next, and while they may not miss the crumbling buildings they called home, many will be separated from the friends and neighbors they have lived with for years.

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