

The Women of Chicago Public Housing. Architects of their Own ‘Homeplace’

Mujeres y vivienda pública en Chicago. Arquitectas de su propio ‘homeplace’

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Abstract

The story of public housing in Chicago, and the rest of the United States for that matter, tends to fixate on negative images of housing projects built between c. 1940-1960, like Cabrini-Green or Wentworth Gardens. Now that so many of the buildings have been demolished (or “redeveloped”) and scholars, institutions, and the general public have begun to untangle the complexity of the history of public housing in the U.S., it is time to move beyond the damaging narratives and negative imagery to better understand how women persevered and adapted to ensure they and their families not only had basic needs met, but also had access to safe spaces, key facilities, and opportunities for community-building, joy, and pride in their home. This paper explores connections between issues of architecture and the impact of women on the design and reform of Cabrini-Green, Wentworth Gardens, and other key examples, to demonstrate how women residents helped shape the built environment of public housing in Chicago through organizing, activism, and the appropriation of space based on everyday needs and use. Through an analysis of photographs documenting the interiors of Cabrini-Green and using a theoretical framework that combines feminist theorist bell hooks’ notion of the ‘homeplace’ as a ‘site of resistance’ (1990) with architectural historian Dell Upton’s concept of the ‘cultural landscape’ (1991), this paper proposes that we modify our current definition of an “Architect” and in fact consider these public housing residents ‘architects of their own homeplace’.

Keywords

Women Architects, Space Appropriation, Activism, Alternative Professionals, Feminist Practices

Resumen

La historia de la vivienda pública en Chicago, y el resto de los Estados Unidos, tiende a fijarse en imágenes negativas de proyectos de vivienda construidos entre 1940 y 1960, como Cabrini-Green o Wentworth Gardens. Ahora que muchos de los edificios han sido demolidos (o “reconstruidos”) y los académicos, las instituciones y el público en general han comenzado a desentrañar la complejidad de la historia de la vivienda pública en los Estados Unidos, es hora de ir más allá de las narrativas dañinas y de las imágenes negativas para comprender mejor cómo las mujeres perseveraron y se adaptaron para garantizar que ellas y sus familias no solo tuvieran satisfechas sus necesidades básicas, sino que también tuvieran acceso a espacios seguros, instalaciones clave y oportunidades para la construcción de la vida en comunidad, alegría y orgullo en su hogar. Este documento explora las conexiones entre los problemas de la arquitectura y el impacto de las mujeres en el diseño y la reforma de Cabrini-Green, Wentworth Gardens y otros ejemplos clave, para demostrar cómo las mujeres residentes ayudaron a dar forma al entorno construido de la vivienda pública en Chicago, a través de la organización, el activismo y la apropiación del espacio en función de sus necesidades y del uso cotidiano de los espacios. A través del análisis de fotografías que documentan los interiores de Cabrini-Green y utilizando un marco teórico que combina la teórica feminista de bell hooks del “homeplace” como ‘sitio de resistencia’ (1990) con el concepto del ‘paisaje cultural’ del historiador de la arquitectura Dell Upton (1991), este artículo propone que modifiquemos nuestra definición actual de ‘Arquitecto’ y que consideremos a estos residentes de viviendas públicas como ‘arquitectos de su propio ‘homeplace’.

Palabras clave

Mujeres arquitectas, Apropiación del espacio, Activismo, Prácticas alternativas, Prácticas feministas

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Homes and Gardens

In Chicago-based artist Kerry James Marshall's 1994 "Garden Project" series, the artist highlighted the irony in the Chicago Housing Authority (CHA)'s decision to tack the term "gardens" onto the name of many public housing projects that, decades later, had developed notoriety for crime and poverty (figure 1). For decades the accumulation of negative images around public housing had dominated media coverage and pop culture, from the infamous photographs and film footage documenting the demolition of the high-rise towers of the Pruitt-Igoe housing complex in St. Louis,¹ to horror films like *Candyman* (1992), filmed at Cabrini-Green, implying that life in public housing was parallel to the experience of characters in a slasher flick. Marshall aimed to dispel the myth that life in public housing is all bad, noting: "What I wanted to show in those paintings is that whatever you think about the projects, they're that and more. If you think they're full of hopelessness and despair, you're wrong. There are actually a lot of opportunities to experience pleasure in the projects".² Stepping over a floating banner heralding the title of the painting reproduced here, we see a young Black couple walking along the grounds of Wentworth Gardens, a low-rise housing complex commissioned in 1945. Rays of sunshine peek out from behind one of the buildings above the couple, who are framed by a little garland of clouds and flanked on either side by two graceful bluebirds. The image presents a sunny vision of people experiencing "pleasure in the projects" that is nevertheless marred by streaks of light blue, white, and light green paint that at first glance look like graffiti on the canvas's surface until we realize that there are in fact hidden images within the "graffiti"—ghostly flowers that sprout up on the left side of the canvas from a circular plot of soil, for example. The tall, white flowers on the left contrast with and balance out Marshall's characteristically dark-skinned couple on the right who, like the flowers or the trees in the background, seem to bloom from a circle of soil beneath their feet. As art historian and critic David Deitcher noted, Marshall's series "[brings] to mind bell hooks' insistence that art should not only tell it like it is but imagine the way things can be."³



Figure 1. Kerry James Marshall, *Better Homes, Better Gardens*, 1994. Acrylic and collage on canvas. Denver Art Museum.

- 1 Those photographs attained perhaps even more infamy after they were published in Charles Jencks's widely read book on the "death" of modern architecture and the "birth" of postmodern architecture, *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture* (New York: Rizzoli, 1977).
- 2 "Object: Better Homes, Better Gardens," Denver Art Museum (2020), accessed March 26, 2021, <https://www.denverartmuseum.org/en/edu/object/better-homes-better-gardens>,
- 3 David Deitcher, "Kerry James Marshall," *4Columns* (December 12, 2016), accessed March 29, 2022, <https://4columns.org/deitcher-david/kerry-james-marshall>,

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- 4 Blaine Harden, "Combat Zone Calm," *Washington Post*, April 12, 1981, accessed April 13, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1981/04/12/combat-zone-calm/bd546db0-583a-4d9f-8e21-1ff37b41aa60/>.
- 5 For more on Black women's agency in public housing that was conducted outside of the Chicago context, see Rhonda Y Williams, *The Politics of Public Housing: Black Women's Struggles against Urban Inequality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004); Jacqueline Leavitt and Susan Saegert, *From Abandonment to Hope: Community-Households in Harlem* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990); and Akira Drake Rodriguez, *Diverging Space for Deviants. The Politics of Atlanta's Public Housing* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2021). For more on understanding the context of the "failure" of public housing, see Katharine Bristol, "The Pruitt-Igoe Myth," *The Journal of Architectural Education* 44, n° 3 (1991): 163-171; Nicholas Bloom, Fritz Umbach, and Lawrence Vale (ed.), *Public Housing Myths: Perception, Reality, and Social Policy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015); and the special issue of the *Journal of the American Planning Association* on the 75th Anniversary of Public Housing, edited by Joseph Heathcott (2012).
- 6 For more on the role of architects/architecture in affordable housing, see Karen Kubey's guest-edited issue of *Architectural Design (AD)*, "Design for Impact: Measuring Architecture's Social Value in the United States" (July/August 2020).
- 7 From the Sixth Milan Triennale of 1936, when Giuseppe Pagano and Guarniero Daniel organized the *Architettura rurale italiana* (Rural Italian Architecture) pavilion centered on examples of vernacular architecture from across Italy, to the 1964 exhibition curated by Bernard Rudofsky, "Architecture without Architects" at the Museum of Modern Art, architectural historians have attempted to include vernacular architecture and "anonymous" architects in the canon of architectural history. This perspective, however, has long been disputed although current scholarship on feminist "minor architectures" has helped support this position.

Marshall's series countered the prevailing narratives of violence, drugs, and desperation in the media's treatment of public housing in the 1980s and 1990s. Television coverage and newspaper articles often reinforced harmful racialized stereotypes about Black men as absent fathers, Black women as "welfare queens," and young Black men as criminals. In a representative piece published in *The Washington Post* in 1981 ("Combat Zone Calm") detailing then-Mayor Jane M. Byrne's move into Cabrini-Green in an effort to reduce crime, author Blaine Harden editorialized to heighten the reader's emotional response. Opening the article by declaring Cabrini-Green "one of the nation's bloodiest and most wretched high-rise public housing projects," Harden described it as "a vertical ghetto," resembling "nothing so much as a badly run, scandalously underfunded prison," wherein the "stairwells reek of urine, stale beer and vomit," and "nearly every square foot of concrete in the hallways...is covered with graffiti, much of which praises killing."⁴ Reducing the residents to statistics, the author noted that "nearly 80 percent of the families in the projects are headed by single women on welfare," but did not provide any context that would shed light on such statistics and the human impact on these women.⁵

Although the term "public housing" is increasingly replaced by "affordable housing," now generally led by private and nonprofit developers, many of the stigmas remain the same.⁶ Now that scholars, historians, and institutions have begun to untangle the complex history of public housing in the United States, the discourse needs to move beyond the negative images and assumptions, as Kerry James Marshall asked viewers to do nearly thirty years ago, to instead explore the ways in which residents persevered and adapted to ensure that they and their families not only had basic needs met, but also had access to safe spaces, key facilities, and opportunities for community-building, joy, and pride in their homes (figure 2, figure 3). In shifting attention away from the damaging and stubborn narrative of "hopelessness and despair" to one in which "opportunities to experience pleasure" are foregrounded, this paper examines the ways in which residents - and women in particular - helped shape the built environment in Chicago public housing through organizing, resident rights activism, and appropriation of space based on everyday needs. Drawing upon recent oral history interviews and diverse sources on public housing, this analysis centers on a few key documents from 1981 to 1991. Using photographs documenting the interiors of Cabrini-Green held in the Newberry Library Special Collections archive in Chicago and the Museum of Contemporary Photography in Chicago, and applying a theoretical framework that combines feminist theorist bell hooks' notion of the "homeplace" as a site of resistance (1990) with architectural historian Dell Upton's concept of the "cultural landscape" in his study of American domestic architecture (1991), this paper highlights the agency and creative contributions of the very people who lived in these housing projects. Proposing that scholars modify their current definition of an "Architect" (with a capital 'A') to encompass the agency of residents to reshape the built landscape through appropriation and adaptation, this approach builds off of studies of public housing that focus on the lived experiences of the residents. Instead of viewing residents merely as victims of a broken system—and instead of disconnecting their activism from issues of aesthetics—this paper demonstrates how their organizing efforts had a major impact on the design and function of their homes. This is thus an effort to revise our understanding of public housing and acknowledge that despite the many challenges and barriers they faced, women residents were a determining factor in the successes of shaping space within these building complexes.

This paper is certainly not the first suggestion that scholars blur the distinction between "Architecture" (designed by trained and licensed architects) and "architecture" (designed by unknown or "anonymous" architects).⁷ In Dell Upton's



Figure 2. Marc PoKempner, Jackie and her baby outside 929 N Hudson, Cabrini-Green, 1988. Gelatin silver print.

Figure 3. Marc PoKempner, Dancing at a house party, Cabrini-Green, 1988. Gelatin silver print. Both Museum of Contemporary Photography, Chicago.

- 8 Dell Upton, "The Traditional House and its Enemies," *Traditional Dwellings and Settlements Review* 1, n° 2 (Spring 1990): 82.
- 9 Dell Upton, *Holy Things and Profane: Anglican Parish Churches in Colonial Virginia* (New York: Architectural History Foundation, 1986). For work on the "user," see Kenny Cupers (ed.), *Use Matters: An Alternative History of Architecture* (London and New York: Routledge, 2013).
- 10 Dell Upton, "Architecture in Everyday Life," *New Literary History* 33, n° 4, *Everyday Life* (Autumn 2002): 721.
- 11 Roberta M. Feldman and Susan Stall, *The Dignity of Resistance: Women Residents' Activism in Chicago Public Housing* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2004).
- 12 Audrey Petty, *High Rise Stories: Voices from Chicago Public Housing* (San Francisco: McSweeney's and Voice of Witness, 2013).
- 13 Ben Austen, *High-Risers: Cabrini Green and the Fate of American Public Housing* (New York: Harper Collins, 2018).
- 14 D. Bradford Hunt, *Blueprint for Disaster: The Unraveling of Chicago Public Housing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).
- 15 Oscar Newman, *Defensible Space: Crime Prevention Through Urban Design* (New York: Macmillan Publishing, 1972); Catherine Fennell, *Last Project Standing: Civics and Sympathy in Post-Welfare Chicago* (University of Minnesota Press, 2005); Amy Khare, "Market-Driven Public Housing Reforms: Inadequacy for Poverty Alleviation" *Cityscape* 15, n° 2, *Mixed Messages on Mixed Incomes* (2013): 193-203.

analysis of American domestic architecture, he noted that the nineteenth century shift to professionalization and commercialization in the architecture discipline constituted an attack on the "traditional" vernacular American house that helped establish the idea that "architecture is whatever architects do," and "vernacular building is 'undesigned,' 'unselfconscious,' utilitarian, artless, or unworthy."⁸ Upton's ground-breaking 1986 study of Anglican parish churches in rural Virginia was the first to actually consider the ways in which the everyday *user* of those spaces impacted their design and evolution over time.⁹ Upton concludes his 2002 article "Architecture in Everyday Life," by noting that "we can examine the cultural landscape without recourse to the hierarchies and oppositions of high and low that impede understanding and have fragmented the field for many years into advocates for and scholars of 'high' and 'low' architecture, Architecture and architecture..."¹⁰

Publications like Roberta Feldman and Susan Stall's *The Dignity of Resistance: Women Residents' Activism in Chicago Public Housing* (2004)¹¹ and Audrey Petty's *High Rise Stories: Voices from Chicago Public Housing* (2013)¹² volume of oral history narratives, are also key to understanding the experience of women residents as inhabitants, activists, and organizers. Ben Austen's *High-Risers: Cabrini-Green and the Fate of Public Housing* (2018)¹³ and D. Bradford Hunt's *Blueprint for Disaster: The Unraveling of Chicago Public Housing* (2009)¹⁴ provide more broad, yet critical historical overviews of the public housing crisis in Chicago. While several of the above sociologists, political science experts, journalists, and urban historians successfully center women residents' experiences and contributions to the development of public housing, many others do not – especially architectural historians. That is not to imply that public housing has not already been a major topic of study. In examples ranging from Oscar Newman's groundbreaking and influential *Defensible Space* (1972) theory to Amy Khare and Catherine Fennell's work on redevelopment in Chicago, scholars have considered the vital intersections between architectural design, history, and sociology in the discourse on public housing.¹⁵ Newman's theory in particular has been greatly influential on the actual design of housing and the New Urbanism/HOPE VI redevelopment of public housing.

"Space appropriation" is a key concept here as well; in Henri Lefebvre's book *The Production of Space* (1974), he identified "appropriated spaces" as an important

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counter to “dominated spaces”,¹⁶ acknowledging that everyday life weighs heaviest on women, the working class, and other marginalized groups. Yet, as feminist architectural historian Mary McLeod explains, Lefebvre also identified the ways in which everyday life “provides women realms for fantasy and desire, *for rebellion and assertion*—arenas outside of bureaucratic systematization”.¹⁷ Space appropriation is also closely connected with hooks’ notion of the homeplace, since most space appropriation theorists consider the home to be the most important place to satisfy and express oneself.¹⁸

Explored here are the connections between design and the impact of women on the design and reform of public housing projects in Chicago, and the power in re-naming and reimagining “the user” as “an architect.” Beyond a sociological study, beyond an attempt to dispel more myths of failure, or a study of the commons or the user as focal points, the aim is to bring together these various issues, in a new approach to architectural history. This could apply not only to public housing, but could be extended to the discourse on housing in general, and how architecture functions as a physical structure that is maintained and meaningfully modified by others through changing needs and use over time, even if a trained architect initially designed it. Drawing from interviews and oral histories of former residents, studying photographs of Cabrini-Green from the 1980s, and taking Upton’s and hooks’ arguments a step further to reframe notions of authorship, agency, and power, this project contends that the women of Chicago public housing acted as “architects” of their own “homeplace.”

Building a ‘Homeplace’ in the New ‘Cultural Landscape’

Hooks’ “homeplace” is a space where gender and race intersect, and where the responsibility for its construction and maintenance most frequently falls on the shoulders of Black women, especially in white supremacist societies, and more often than not, by the 1980s women were the head of household in the examples analyzed here.¹⁹ The “homeplace” is also, as hooks defined it, a multifaceted conception of the domestic realm as one of both solace and defiance, “the one site where one could freely confront the issue of humanization, where one could resist. Black women resisted by making homes where all black people could strive to be subjects, not objects, where we could be affirmed in our minds and hearts despite poverty, hardship, and deprivation, where we could restore to ourselves the dignity denied us on the outside in the public world”.²⁰

Like hooks, Upton’s “cultural landscape” is focused on the human experience, defined as a “fusion of the physical with the imaginative structures that all inhabitants of the landscape use in constructing and construing it. Since there can be no normative perception, the human environment is necessarily the product of powerful yet diffuse imaginations, fractured by the faultlines of class, culture, and personality”.²¹ Key to Upton’s analysis is a critique of the distinction between professional - architecture with an upper-case “A”, and vernacular - architecture with a lower-case “a”, “understood in its broadest sense to encompass the entire material world [of things] that people make and think”.²² Upton stops short of proposing that architectural historians dissolve that distinction, however, in his call to “examine the cultural landscape without recourse to the hierarchies and oppositions of high and low that impede understanding and have fragmented the field for many years”.²³

Although Upton focused on very particular examples of housing (single-family homes and slave quarters in Virginia), and hooks referred more broadly to the “home,” not distinguishing between a single-family house or an apartment dwelling, some of

16 Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, translated by Donald Nicholson (New York: Horizon Press, 1974), 164-168.

17 Mary McLeod, “Henri Lefebvre’s Critique of Everyday Life: An Introduction,” in *Everyday Architecture*, ed. Harris and Berke (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1997), 18. Emphasis added.

18 Feldman and Stall, *Dignity of Resistance*, 185.

19 bell hooks, “Homeplace (a site of resistance).” In *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (Boston: South End Books, 1990), 384.

20 hooks, “Homeplace,” 384.

21 Dell Upton, “Architectural History or Landscape History?,” *Journal of Architectural Education* 44, n° 4 (August 1991): 198.

22 Upton, “Architecture in Everyday Life,” 707.

23 Upton, “Architectural History or Landscape History?,” 198.



Figure 4. Marc PoKempner, Man holding baby, Cabrini-Green, 1988. Gelatin silver print. Museum of Contemporary Photography, Chicago.

the issues that she and Upton raised are crucial to reconsidering public housing in Chicago and the impact of women's organizing efforts on their own homes. From the role that race plays regarding access to (or within) public and private spaces, the ways in which the inhabitant helps shape space based on everyday use, and the layout of spaces and communal areas across gendered lines, both the 'homeplace' and the 'cultural landscape' center around the inhabitant's power to effect change on domestic architecture. The notion of the home or "homeplace" as a site of resistance plays an important part in both scholars' work, and in the story of activism in Chicago public housing.

As much as hooks and Upton recognized the impact of the "user" on the spaces they used, in the beginning of the public housing debates it was widely believed that the future inhabitants did not need to be consulted when designing public housing. Instead, it was a discussion amongst governmental agencies and sociologists. In the 1950s, sociologists Elizabeth Wood and Catherine Bauer were some of the lone voices advocating for low-rise over high-rise public housing, based on gendered grounds. They argued that low-rise buildings allowed the mother to be closer to their child and keep an eye on them while she worked within the home.²⁴ In high-rise examples like the Cabrini-Green Extension towers, the CHA pointed out that the covered ramps created a kind of "open porch," which they noted was "a convenient play space for small children under mother's watchful eyes".²⁵ Despite those intentions, the high-rise building typology, if anything, created a greater distance between parents and their children, who more often would succumb to violence on the open grounds of the complex where they were out of view.²⁶ By the 1960s the CHA played a central role in creating a "new model of public housing" for those denied the proverbial white picket fence, as Audrey Petty explained: "In opposition to early CHA policies that endorsed row houses and small multi-family buildings as more socially productive and family-friendly, Mayer Richard J. Daley... and the CHA opted for the high rise as the new model of public housing," which quickly "became iconic."²⁷

High-rise, postwar public housing complexes in the U.S. like Pruitt-Igoe and the Cabrini-Green extension towers exhibited an architectural style associated with Neo-Brutalism, which was characterized by an over-sized scale, exposed structural elements and often featuring raw, unadorned, and unpainted concrete, likely due to its economy of means, ease of construction, and low cost – in other words, its practicality. According to Docomomo, a modernist architecture preservation group,

24 Petty, *High Rise Stories*, 241.

25 As quoted in Austen, *High-Risers*, 23.

26 Petty, *High Rise Stories*, 242.

27 Petty, *High Rise Stories*, 19.

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it also resulted in a desirable spatial and aesthetic outcome: “The use of load-bearing concrete walls eliminated the need for interior columns, making the apartments feel bigger than they are”.²⁸ This aesthetic argument, however, suggesting that these apartments were somehow comparable to modernist open-plan apartments, is problematic. The exposed cinder blocks (figure 4) of Cabrini-Green interiors, resembling the bare walls of so many public university classrooms or even prison construction methods, made it challenging to decorate the walls. The linoleum flooring found throughout Cabrini’s interiors resembled the floor of a school cafeteria, designed to be easy-to-clean, mask stains, and cheap to replace (figure 5, figure 6). The blank canvas of any given apartment thus seemed antithetical to a cozy vision of “home.”

In 1981, photographer Mike Tappin documented interiors of several Cabrini-Green apartments, some of which were published in the April 3rd 1981 issue of the *Chicago Reader*. Four of Tappin’s photographs were later published in the *Chicago Reader* in 1983, accompanied by text written by Steve Bogira. While the original intention of the photographs and text was to document people subsisting at the poverty line while relying on government programs and economic structures that discriminate against the Black community, the photographs demonstrate the ways in which residents injected an element of personality into the cinder-block-and-linoleum-floor apartment shells. Decorative appliqués act as a kind of wallpaper, and gauzy drapery provides a delicate counterpoint to the still-visible cinder blocks (figure 5, figure 6). Mirrors and brushed aluminum squares act as decorative devices on otherwise fairly bare walls, and create a greater sense of depth in a smaller space. Floral patterns abound, and beyond simply being a holdover from 1970s interior design trends, introduced multisensory allusions to nature – the vibrant colors, the fragrance, the softness, etc. – perhaps small attempts to counteract the otherwise cold, institutional aesthetic throughout.

Another way to create a “homeplace” was to ensure that your family was supported by an extended family, an essential community of caregivers referred to as “othermothers” that sustained and nurtured life across the complex at Cabrini-Green, Wentworth Gardens, and other public housing sites (figure 7).²⁹ According to one resident of Cabrini, “my grandmother stayed down the hall. I knew nearly everyone in the building. All the ladies helped each other out”.³⁰ Resident Chandra Bell noted: “All your kids play together. That’s when you become a big family. One of us might get a job and be like, ‘Hey neighbor, can you watch my kid?’ That’s how it went, and it was real nice”.³¹ This network of othermothers created a safety net as well. Safety played a key part in hooks’ definition of the “homeplace”: “a safe place where black people could affirm one another and by so doing heal many of the wounds inflicted by racist domination”.³² For some women, like those living at Lake Parc Place in the Oakland neighborhood of Chicago, a sense of self-preservation went beyond racial lines and meant avoiding too much social interaction in order to protect one’s family and homeplace, to keep them safe from the “surveillance and scrutiny” (as Tennille Allen put it) that took place outside of their apartment.³³

The design and construction reinforced the protective, fortress-like, institutional quality of the buildings as well: “Cabrini was brick inside and out. The door wasn’t steel, but it was really thick, good quality wood”.³⁴ The Cabrini-Green Extension towers had open-air galleries on each floor - “sidewalks in the air,” as Elizabeth Wood called them - and as the CHA pointed out, “Each family could have ‘ready access to the out-of-doors’”.³⁵ The exterior spaces, as an extension of the interior homeplace, become part of the larger cultural landscape. In Upton’s description of the Black cultural landscape of eighteenth-century Virginia, he explained how the slave quarters were the center of their “personal life and prerogative”; but the

28 Fred A. Bernstein, “Meet Chatham Towers, the architect aerie of Lower Manhattan,” *Curbed New York*, March 1, 2019, accessed June 8 2021, <https://ny.curbed.com/2019/3/1/18240137/chatham-towers-who-lives-there-architects>.

29 Feldman and Stall, *The Dignity of Resistance: Women Residents’ Activism in Chicago Public Housing*, 95.

30 Petty, *High Rise Stories*, 126.

31 Petty, *High Rise Stories*, 166.

32 Petty, *High Rise Stories*, 166.

33 Tennille Allen, “I didn’t let everybody come in my house’: Exploring bell hooks’ Notion of the Homeplace.” *The CLR James Journal* 17, no. 1, Special Issue: On the Emancipatory Thought of bell hooks (Fall 2011): 75-101.

34 Petty, *High Rise Stories*, 118.

35 As quoted in Austen, *High-Risers*, 23.

Figure 5 (LEFT). Mike Tappin, John Smith in Hatcher's; Figure 6 (RIGHT). Mike Tappin, Prentiss Hatcher, both gelatin silver prints, published in the Chicago Reader, April 3, 1981. The Newberry Library Special Collections, Chicago.



Figure 7. Mike Tappin, Ann Bond with Adria and neighbor's child on left; gelatin silver print, published in the Chicago Reader, April 3, 1981. The Newberry Library Special Collections, Chicago.



cultural landscape extended beyond their small quarters to include the woods and fields where they had access to some seclusion – and in some cases, a chance to gather with other enslaved people for religious meetings or even community organizing.³⁶

With this in mind, I want to return to the theme of the homeplace as a site of resistance, where one could find safety and security, ‘resist’ the white suprematism of the outside world, and “heal many of the wounds inflicted by racist domination”.³⁷ hooks reminds us that “it has been primarily the responsibility of black women to construct domestic households as spaces of care and nurturance”,³⁸ and several of Tappin’s photographs suggest how floral upholstery and a few overstuffed chairs can contribute to a warm and comforting refuge from the outside world.

36 Upton, “White and Black Landscapes in Eighteenth-Century Virginia,” 70.

37 hooks, “Homeplace,” 384.

38 hooks, “Homeplace,” 384.

39 Gwendolyn Wright, “Design and Affordable Housing,” *Cityscape* 16, No. 2, “Form Follows Families: Evolution of U.S. Affordable Housing Design and Construction (2014): 69-86.

Adaptation, Activism, and Collaboration

When it comes to “good design,” to use architectural historian Gwendolyn Wright’s phrasing, the direct involvement of residents is absolutely essential, and yet often missing.³⁹ Indeed, the lack of resident involvement and input in the process of public housing design was a fatal flaw. Too often, architectural historians have

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downplayed the agency and role that inhabitants play in shaping their own space, especially when it comes to public housing. This is reflected in the ways in which residents were often prevented from participating in any official conversations about improving public housing. While there was a time in which the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) attempted resident-led management (in Chicago, this included LeClaire Courts, the first integrated low-rise housing project in the city), residents were not involved in the planning and design stages.

As Upton would explain, the notion of “intention” in architecture is easily criticized, considering that once a building enters the world and is no longer a mere designed object but a space to be used, it enters an endless cycle of reimagining and repurposing, blurring the distinguishing line between designer and user. “Once introduced into the landscape,” he writes, “the identity of a building and the intentions of its makers are dissolved within confusing patterns of human perception, imagination, and use. Consequently, the meaning of a building is determined primarily by its viewers and users. This process of creation goes on long after the crew leaves the site; it never stops (...) yet so much of architectural history is directed toward identifying the pure form, the original condition, the architect’s intention. How relatively unimportant these are! (...) Most of what is important about architecture is unintended. Designers, like other users, become the objects, as well as the subjects, of their own and others’ work. Thus, there is little point in separating designer and user (...).”⁴⁰ Space adaptation, then, becomes part of the ongoing construction - or “construing,” as Upton would say - of a building and its meaning(s).

Adapting public housing apartments to make them more home-like was, for some residents like Annie Ricks of Cabrini-Green, essential and often came down to interior furnishing - not just for the beautification of her own home, but also for the practical consideration of avoiding having the Department of Children and Family Services called in by police who accused her family of squatting in their new apartment. She used a voucher to choose furniture (bunk beds for the children, a kitchen table and chairs) as well as new cabinets and new tile in the kitchen.⁴¹

Color was also leveraged to express and assert one’s individuality. Many residents have explained how something as simple as a fresh coat of paint became a remarkable way to personalize their apartments and make them feel like home. Several residents remarked upon the particularly ugly and unpleasant colors chosen for interiors. Cynthia Scott, for example, described her Lathrop Homes apartment’s wall color as “pee yellow, like somebody had peed on the wall for days”.⁴² At Stateway Gardens, Francine Washington got nine gallons of paint and had a “paint party” with friends and family in order to cover up the nauseating green walls throughout the apartment with something more inspired: “(...) one night I said ‘I’m so tired of these green walls, I don’t know what to do.’ Everything was green throughout the whole apartment, even the bathroom (...) so I got a magic marker, and I just started drawing shapes all over the apartment (...) One wall actually had the continent of Africa on it, another wall had Doonesbury cartoon characters, [another one was] abstract – each one of my walls was so different and so unique, and the colors – they just put colors everywhere (...) and when we finished, we were like ‘oh man, what did we do?!’ It was so unique, it was so amazing. I could not believe. It was so amazing. (...) then I got some red and some blue carpets, put them down ... split them in half of the room, red and blue, even though I didn’t have any red or blue on the walls. But I had pink, I had light blue, I had cayenne, yellow, purple (...) everybody wanted me to paint their apartment but I said ‘Nuh uh, this is *me*’.”⁴³

Ms. Washington also explained how she used the wall paint to keep her children engaged in looking and learning: “Nothing’s worse than looking at a bare wall (...)

40 Upton, “Architectural History or Landscape History?,” 197.

41 Austen, High Risers, 123.

42 Maya Dukmasova, “Residents Reflect on Rehabbed Lathrop Homes,” Chicago Reader, September 18, 2019, accessed June 11, 2021, <https://www.chicagoreader.com/chicago/resident-reflections-lathrop-homes-redevelopment/Content?oid=73330809>

43 Francine Washington, Stateway Gardens resident interviewed for the NPHM Oral History Project, episode 4: “Black is Beautiful: Reflections on Arts, Culture and Activism” (original air date: June 25, 2020).

I mean, if you've got kids, you've got to give them something to focus on (...) if you've just got one picture, rest of the wall's just white, there's nothing for them to make their mind wander, nothing for them to think about in the abstract." So she ensured that "every wall was different" in her apartment – "and that's how I taught my kids their colors. I had an apartment and it had 104 colors (...) they learned their colors by every color I had in my apartment".⁴⁴ Annie Ricks noted that she chose new paint colors for each room (blue for the front room, yellow for the kitchen, and pink for the girls' bedroom),⁴⁵ and Dolores Wilson convinced a local hardware store to donate ten gallons of paint to outfit the recreation room in her building at 1230 N. Burling.⁴⁶ A discussion of paint jobs may seem insignificant but it could also be seen as a radical act considering that in many public housing projects, painting the walls was off-limits.

Residents also took action to ensure that they had suitable amenities on site. In 1968 at Wentworth Gardens, longtime resident and activist Hallie Amey and fellow residents organized to open a laundromat, which they subsequently self-maintained and managed into the 1970s after the CHA had closed it down due to vandalism.⁴⁷ They even used the funds from the coin-operated laundry to fund some small scholarships.⁴⁸ In 1973, after several children were hit by cars while trying to cross 39th street to get groceries, they secured the space and funds for a convenience store located in the basement.⁴⁹ A "field house" (referred to in CHA documents as the "community building") was created simply as an extension of offices in an adjoining building, but residents adapted it to be used as an auditorium for social gatherings classes for preschoolers. However, in the early 1960s, by which point it was also being used as a youth recreation center, CHA closed it.⁵⁰ Amey noted that they donated their own pencils, paper, and toys and charged a \$1 registration fee to pay for milk and cookies for the children: "it was the only place in the community with room enough for the kids to play and for us to hold meetings ... we didn't have park space ... we had to create something from nothing."⁵¹ Dolores Wilson, a Cabrini-Green resident, used money allotted by the CHA for "miscellaneous expenses" to purchase a used pool table, Ping-Pong table, and a thrift store sofa "with a psychedelic design" (as she described it) for their shared recreation center; other tenants planted a garden on the empty land alongside the building.⁵² Ms. Wilson was also involved in a 1992 renovation and rehabilitation of her building, when residents of 1230 N. Burling became a Resident Management Corporation (RMC) responsible for an annual budget of \$6 million, and helped select colors and styles for everything from blinds and tile to the elevator entrance and exterior façade.⁵³ Residents also reimagined their outdoor spaces. At Wentworth Gardens, the concrete slab in front of most apartments was referred to by residents as the "front porch," evoking a feature of more traditional single-family houses.⁵⁴

In Upton's study of eighteenth-century slave quarters in Virginia, he emphasized the ways in which enslaved people maintained a "strong sense of territorial and personal rights," devoting time to tend their personal gardens and poultry as well as furnish their houses in order to make themselves more comfortable, even if the allocation of labor and materials rarely allowed for significant changes to the buildings.⁵⁵ These interior design choices were also, as hooks keenly observed, a form of resistance - an effort to make the home a place where "all black people could strive to be subjects, not objects". "Historically," she writes, "African-American people believed that the construction of a homeplace, however fragile and tenuous (the slave hut, the wooden shack), had a radical political dimension".⁵⁶ By adapting their apartments with new furniture, color, and decorative details, the women residents of Chicago public housing constructed a homeplace, a space of "care and nurturance," giving their families an opportunity to be *subjects* with the power to push back against institutional racism and sexism and change their environs.

44 Francine Washington, interviewed for the NPHM Oral History Project.

45 Austen, *High Risers*, 123.

46 Austen, *High Risers*, 159.

47 Feldman and Stall, *Dignity of Resistance*, 151. Also see Dawn Turner Trice, "South Side Activist's Vision Becoming Reality," *Chicago Tribune*. December 6, 2004, accessed January 29, 2021, <https://www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-xpm-2004-12-06-0412060094-story.html>

48 Trice, "South Side Activist's Vision Becoming Reality."

49 Feldman and Stall, *Dignity of Resistance*, 182.

50 Feldman and Stall, *Dignity of Resistance*, 179.

51 Trice, "South Side Activist's Vision Becoming Reality."

52 Austen, *High Risers*, 159.

53 Feldman and Stall, *Dignity of Resistance*, 225; Gilbert Jimenez, "HUD gives \$110 million boost to CHA," *Chicago Sun-Times* (October 10, 1995).

54 Feldman and Stall, *Dignity of Resistance*, 91.

55 Upton, "White and Black Landscapes in Eighteenth-Century Virginia," *Places* 2, n° 2 (1984): 70.

56 hooks, "Homeplace," 384.

Mujeres, prácticas feministas
y profesionales alternativos
en la arquitectura

Women, Feminist Practices and
Alternative Practitioners in Architecture

REBECCA SIEFERT

The Women of Chicago Public Housing.
Architects of their Own 'Homeplace'

Mujeres y vivienda pública en Chicago.
Arquitectas de su propio 'homeplace'

Conclusion

Through radical acts of space appropriation, and by asserting their agency within the confines of CHA rules and regulations, women residents of Chicago public housing demonstrated a keen sensibility for color and decoration, as well as an intimate understanding of how a building's 'program' ought to determine form and function in order to fulfill resident needs. Such roles and skills comprise the practices of an architect. The redefinition of 'architect' here is vital, as acts of renaming and reappropriation reflect central tenets of feminist theory. While this is an act of redefining the domestic sphere and the terms used to describe its making, feminist scholars are simultaneously expanding our definition of the domestic realm to include the public sphere, since public housing is inherently political (and 'public'). As Sylvia Federici explains in "Feminism and the Politics of the Commons," we must "put an end to the separation between the personal and the political, and between political activism and the reproduction of everyday life," in order to build a strong alternative society in which women have reclaimed the house "as a center of collective life".⁵⁷ It is, according to Federici and feminist architectural historian Dolores Hayden, "a question of labor and, we can add, a question of power and safety".⁵⁸

The women of Cabrini-Green, Wentworth Gardens, and other public housing projects in Chicago wielded a visible, instrumental and sustained impact on the built environment through planning, implementing, managing, stewarding, and adapting their housing. We can no longer simplify their efforts as acts of redecorating; this is *architectural* work as much as it is political work. "Failure to recognize the realm of choice," according to hooks, "and the remarkable re-visioning of both women's role and the idea of 'home' that black women consciously exercised in practice, obscures the political commitment to racial uplift, to eradicating racism, which was the philosophical core of dedication to community and home".⁵⁹ The changes and adaptations made to the apartments, buildings, and surrounding grounds transformed these spaces into cultural landscapes, and transformed these women into architects of their homeplaces. This revelation, these women's names, and images of joy and "pleasure," to quote Kerry James Marshall, should be celebrated and lifted up over the worn-out public housing narratives of "hopelessness and despair."

Figures Sources

Figure 1. Kerry James Marshall, *Better Homes, Better Gardens*, 1994. Acrylic and collage on canvas. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

Figure 2. Marc PoKempner, *Jackie and her baby outside 929 N Hudson, Cabrini-Green*, 1988. Gelatin silver print. Museum of Contemporary Photography, Chicago.

Figure 3. Marc PoKempner, *Dancing at a house party, Cabrini-Green*, 1988. Gelatin silver print. Museum of Contemporary Photography, Chicago.

Figure 4. Marc PoKempner, *Man holding baby, Cabrini-Green*, 1988. Gelatin silver print. Museum of Contemporary Photography, Chicago.

Figure 5. Mike Tappin, *John Smith in Hatcher's*, gelatin silver print, published in the *Chicago Reader*, April 3, 1981. The Newberry Library Special Collections, Chicago.

Figure 6. Mike Tappin, *Prentiss Hatcher*, gelatin silver print, published in the *Chicago Reader*, April 3, 1981. The Newberry Library Special Collections, Chicago.

Figure 7. Mike Tappin, *Ann Bond with Adria and neighbor's child on left*, gelatin silver print, published in the *Chicago Reader*, April 3, 1981. The Newberry Library Special Collections, Chicago.

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