Wielding the HACHet at Allen Parkway Village

Diane Y. Ghirardo

The recent resolution of the Houston City Council (July 1984) to approve the Housing Authority of the City of Houston's (HACH) plan to demolish Allen Parkway Village caps at least seven years of determined efforts by a number of city agencies and Houstonians to clear away both the low-cost housing project and the housing in the adjacent Fourth Ward. If the demolition program is successful, black and white Houstonians will have been ill-served by their elected and appointed officials; taxpayers will shoulder entirely unnecessary burdens; and a few landlords and developers will be enriched at the expense of the rest of the community. The case of Allen Parkway Village (APV) raises at least two crucial questions for Houston:

- How does the community treat its least-advantaged members?
- How are decisions made in Houston?

History

Allen Parkway Village was built during the Second World War as San Felipe Courts, wartime public housing for white defense workers. The land was acquired from its owners through eminent domain. As noted in the April 1942 issue of Architectural Record, design and structure of the complex were of special significance. The architects (MacKie and Kamrath, Claude E. Houston, Eugene Werlin, and C. A. Johnson) managed to fit 1,000 units into 37 acres of Houston's predominantly black Fourth Ward without sacrificing ventilation or variety in unit size. Federal guidelines at the time encouraged fire-proof construction; the buildings are of reinforced-concrete frames, with solid slab or pan-and-joint floors, cavity walls with brick exteriors, and hollow-tile plastered interiors. Referring to the solidity of construction, one Houston architect remarked, "If Houston ever undergoes nuclear attack, only Allen Parkway Village will still be intact."

San Felipe Courts was built for white tenants; a chain-link fence kept them at a safe remove from the adjacent Fourth Ward. With the end of legal racial segregation in 1964, APV was desegregated, then became predominantly black. By the late 1970s, as land values in downtown Houston soared, APV's strategic site between River Oaks, the central business district, and Buffalo Bayou made it attractive as a potential development site. HACH authorities began seeking approval from the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) in 1977 because, as J.L. Phillips, chairman of the HACH Board of Commissioners wrote to Secretary Samuel Pierce in 1981, "Business leaders and developers have been approaching the authority for years to express an interest in the purchase of the land." Phillips identified interest as "kern," but did not name developers. On the local scene, HACH pursued highly deceptive strategies to help ensure the sale of the project. Failure to maintain APV and attrition reduced the number of tenants by over one-third. The Dallas Housing Authority pursued the same policy when it recently allowed Washington Place to deteriorate through lack of maintenance and fail to replace tenants when old ones moved, despite a critical shortage of low-cost housing.

Both in Dallas and Houston, the housing authorities advertised the supposedly adverse conditions of the two projects by leaving vacant and then boarding up the units that faced onto major public thoroughfares. Clearly this move was calculated to prompt the middle and upper classes who drive by on their way to and from work to view such projects as "eyesores" - and hence gain their implicit support for demolition. But while the beneficiary of the destruction of Washington Place was never in doubt (Baylor University Medical Center), the forces behind the decade-long struggle for the demolition of APV have operated largely under a cloak of secrecy.

A community disrupted and dispersed is likely to have far more - and far more expensive - problems than one that is nurtured and helped to improve. Unless taxpayers blindly are willing to take on this enormous cost burden, someone will have to talk publicly about who pays and who reaps the profits in the Fourth Ward.

Aerial view of the Fourth Ward, looking east from downtown. (Photo by Paul History)

The recent resolution of the Houston City Council (July 1984) to approve the Housing Authority of the City of Houston's (HACH) plan to demolish Allen Parkway Village caps at least seven years of determined efforts by a number of city agencies and Houstonians to clear away both the low-cost housing project and the housing in the adjacent Fourth Ward. If the demolition program is successful, black and white Houstonians will have been ill-served by their elected and appointed officials; taxpayers will shoulder entirely unnecessary burdens; and a few landlords and developers will be enriched at the expense of the rest of the community. The case of Allen Parkway Village (APV) raises at least two crucial questions for Houston:

- How does the community treat its least-advantaged members?
- How are decisions made in Houston?

History

Allen Parkway Village was built during the Second World War as San Felipe Courts, wartime public housing for white defense workers. The land was acquired from its owners through eminent domain. As noted in the April 1942 issue of Architectural Record, design and structure of the complex were of special significance. The architects (MacKie and Kamrath, Claude E. Houston, Eugene Werlin, and C. A. Johnson) managed to fit 1,000 units into 37 acres of Houston's predominantly black Fourth Ward without sacrificing ventilation or variety in unit size. Federal guidelines at the time encouraged fire-proof construction; the buildings are of reinforced-concrete frames, with solid slab or pan-and-joint floors, cavity walls with brick exteriors, and hollow-tile plastered interiors. Referring to the solidity of construction, one Houston architect remarked, "If Houston ever undergoes nuclear attack, only Allen Parkway Village will still be intact."

San Felipe Courts was built for white tenants; a chain-link fence kept them at a safe remove from the adjacent Fourth Ward. With the end of legal racial segregation in 1964, APV was desegregated, then became predominantly black. By the late 1970s, as land values in downtown Houston soared, APV's strategic site between River Oaks, the central business district, and Buffalo Bayou made it attractive as a potential development site. HACH authorities began seeking approval from the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) in 1977 because, as J.L. Phillips, chairman of the HACH Board of Commissioners wrote to Secretary Samuel Pierce in 1981, "Business leaders and developers have been approaching the authority for years to express an interest in the purchase of the land." Phillips identified interest as "kern," but did not name developers. On the local scene, HACH pursued highly deceptive strategies to help ensure the sale of the project. Failure to maintain APV and attrition reduced the number of tenants by over one-third. The Dallas Housing Authority pursued the same policy when it recently allowed Washington Place to deteriorate through lack of maintenance and fail to replace tenants when old ones moved, despite a critical shortage of low-cost housing.

Both in Dallas and Houston, the housing authorities advertised the supposedly adverse conditions of the two projects by leaving vacant and then boarding up the units that faced onto major public thoroughfares. Clearly this move was calculated to prompt the middle and upper classes who drive by on their way to and from work to view such projects as "eyesores" - and hence gain their implicit support for demolition. But while the beneficiary of the destruction of Washington Place was never in doubt (Baylor University Medical Center), the forces behind the decade-long struggle for the demolition of APV have operated largely under a cloak of secrecy.

A community disrupted and dispersed is likely to have far more - and far more expensive - problems than one that is nurtured and helped to improve. Unless taxpayers blindly are willing to take on this enormous cost burden, someone will have to talk publicly about who pays and who reaps the profits in the Fourth Ward.

Aerial view of the Fourth Ward, looking east from downtown. (Photo by Paul History)
Efrain S. Garcia over control of the area, Phillips had to settle for APV while Garcia retained control of the Fourth Ward. Having worked closely with the Mexican-American community to accomplish the process for the rehabilitation of the Susan V. Clayton Houses low-cost housing project with the creation of the adjacent El Mercado del Sol on the eastern edge of downtown, Garcia turned his energy toward relocating the blacks from the western edge of downtown rather than contemplating a renewal based on the Clayton/El Mercado example. His plan calls for Urban Development Action Grants (UDAG) to assist Fourth Ward families in their moves out of the Fourth Ward, warning that if they fail to cooperate they won't be able to stay at all. For instance, Garcia told me that if owners were to accept an offer from Hong Kong based Allied Gardens Inc., which has already acquired property on Heiner Street along the eastern edge of the Fourth Ward, residents stand to receive nothing.

This kind of thinly veiled economic blackmail evokes the central issue of whether the residents should be moved out at all, who will pick up the tab, and who will reap the profits. Garcia is quick to label opponents of his proposals as "white-good-doers" and "outspoken blacks" who are not Fourth Ward residents. The implication here (and the one he is not fully accurate any way) is that neither group has a right to participate in the fate of the Fourth Ward.

Steven V. Jarnigan is a real-estate developer who represents a coalition of Fourth Ward property owners who informally dates back several years but has been most active in the last two years. Jarnigan believes that recent tax increases in the area, artificially low rents, and the poor condition of the houses leave redevelopment as the only option. He expresses concern about the well-being of the tenants, but finds building new housing the only option for them, and he insists that any development in the area will involve a 50% to 60% low-cost unit program for the elderly, or infeasible, poor. But although he realizes that this will still leave several thousand people homeless with no low-cost housing elsewhere, he can see no other viable alternatives for Houston.

The important point, however, is that issues such as the fate of Allen Parkway Village and the Fourth Ward never do come onto the public agenda. One or two city council meetings in which a proposal sails through does not constitute an agenda.

This summer, two contradictory decisions were made about Houston's Fourth Ward. The Texas Historical Commission nominated some 40 blocks for historic-district status, while the Houston City Council voted in favor of Allen Parkway Village's (APV) demolition. The response from the residents of the area is telling. Both the APV residents and the organizations within the proposed historic district continue their efforts to save their neighborhoods.

The story of what's going on in the Fourth Ward should not go unnoticed. The association (FTA), a relatively young organization in the community that is extremely active. Significant undertakings by the organization include monthly community meetings, the publication of a newsletter, and federal representatives for the area. Their problems are those of the community, to get them to work with residents and to assure them that they will be held accountable for the results of their community members. Thus far, meetings have been well attended by local skeptics such as Greenus and Jim Greenwood, and State Senator Craig Washington is slated next and Congressman Mickey Leland has been invited.

According to community leaders and others, a great deal of misinformation has been spread both by the city and by non-

An Update From HACW's Tower
Dana Cuff

This summer, two contradictory decisions were made about Houston's Fourth Ward. The Texas Historical Commission nominated some 40 blocks for historic-district status, while the Houston City Council voted in favor of Allen Parkway Village's (APV) demolition. The response from the residents of the area is telling. Both the APV residents and the organizations within the proposed historic district continue their efforts to save their neighborhoods.

The story of what's going on in the Fourth Ward should not go unnoticed. The association (FTA), a relatively young organization in the community that is extremely active. Significant undertakings by the organization include monthly community meetings, the publication of a newsletter, and federal representatives for the area. Their problems are those of the community, to get them to work with residents and to assure them that they will be held accountable for the results of their community members. Thus far, meetings have been well attended by local skeptics such as Greenus and Jim Greenwood, and State Senator Craig Washington is slated next and Congressman Mickey Leland has been invited.

According to community leaders and others, a great deal of misinformation has been spread both by the city and by non-

resident landowners. In response to this, Ken Brench, president of the Texas Historical Commission, says his organization is working with landowners, neighborhood organizations, and the city to disentangle conflicting reports about the implications of the historic-district status. The nomination for historical designation will soon be sent to the National Park Service in Washington, and their decision can be expected within a year.

The FTA has been active in many other developments within Freedman's Town. A new parent-teacher association is being formed to support and improve the area's educational system. Tutoring programs are beginning at two sites in Freedman's Town and at one site in Allen Parkway Village. A food cooperative will begin in late October making available fresh vegetables, meats, and dairy products at a reduced rate. A clothes and shoes co-op is planned.

The FTA along with the Fourth Ward Neighborhood Council continue to push for the renovation of Gregory Elementary School as a multi-service center. The center would be an important addition to the area as a community center (with special programs for the elderly) and as headquarters for a variety of community services.

Good Hope Missionary Baptist Church, 1929; J.J. Hawkins, architect (Photo by Paul Heister)
At a resident council election in June 1984, HACH Director Moore first invalidated a number of ballots, and then, when John- son won anyway, invalidated the entire election. Such intervention is not only unprecedented elsewhere, it threatens the rights of the tenants.

On another occasion, according to John- son, when Houston's resident council presidents met with Phillips at a dinner meeting in 1983, only Johnson did not receive a meal.

As petty as these actions seem, they are the strategies HACH is employing to humiliate and silence Johnson. Such behavior by HACH is more reminiscent of some two-bit totalitarian state than it is of a democratic institution in the United States. It is the same sort of thuggish conduct that threatens not just Johnson, but anyone who attempts to voice principled opposition to the policies of appointed or elected officials.

Maintenance and Inflated Rehabilitation Costs

As a homeowner knows, if you under- take no repairs on a structure for a decade, it will become dilapidated. Nothing has been done to APV for nearly a decade, and not surprisingly, it has become dilapi- dated. Beginning at least in 1977, HACH authorities failed to maintain APV in order to enhance the argument that it ought to be torn down, since they had made the proposal to Housing and Urban Development, HUD promptly denied HACH federal funds to repair a project which might be torn down at any time. HUD's grounds were, not unreasonably, that it would be a waste of taxpayer money. Even by HACH's own wildly inflated figures, tearing down APV and moving the tenants is going to be more than twice as costly as rehabilitating it.

The cost of rehabilitating APV is a very troubling issue in the white matter, and cuts right to the heart of what is being hidden.

In the September 1983 HACH report, the total estimated cost of rehabilitation is set at $36,2 million, or $56,200 per unit. At the very same time, renovation of Clayton Homes is set at $14,546 per unit; in much the same condition as APV. Else- where the job has been done for consider- ably less than $20,000 per unit. In San Antonio, for example, projects were mod- ernized for between $15,538 and $18,181 per unit.13 At Clayton Homes, HACH plans to do site work, modernize exteriors, and do interior remodeling; these are pre- cisely the changes that are neces- sary at APV. Robert S. Meiners's annual publication, Building Construction Cost Data, the standard reference manual for cost estimators, lists the cost of brand new public housing (low-rise) at $42,000 per unit. In the HACH report of 1983, HACH lists the costs of utilities site work at $8,70 per square foot; Means gives a figure for this of $30 per square foot.14 Another amount the other expenses, HACH lists $780,000 for security lighting. This will include, the report says, 10 high- pressure sodium fixtures per acre, plus lighting for parking lots and perimeter of buildings. Given the state of the site occupied by buildings, this figure appears ludicrous. Lighting of this wattage (more appropriate for a parking lot) will light the project to a level comparable to high noon on the Fourth of July. HACH also claims that the facades need to be renewed due to moisture penetration; close examination by architects reveals cleaning and repainting the brick would be sufficient - and substantially cheaper.

Part of the cost for renovation derives directly from the HACH policy of not replacing tenants when they move; when an apartment is left for more than a year or later it will be vandalized. Initially, Phil- lips claimed that vacant units were not being filled because no one wanted to move into APV, and he denied that there was a waiting list.15 When HACH decided to evict Indochinese tenants who had bribed a housing officer to find apart- ments at APV, however, Phillips based his action on the grounds that they had not been waiting a sufficient time to be the waiting list.16 A waiting list finally emerged, but only after legal action was initiated by the Wohnung owners, that is, after APV, Houston's need for low-cost housing is enormous.

The Decision-Making Process in Houston

Houstonians ought to be upset about the way decisions are made in their commun- ity - especially when they have to pay the bill. The cards regarding APV have never been laid on the table by Houston offi- cials. As the record shows, the entire campaign against APV and the Fourth Ward consists of misrepresentation, ob- information, crucial information withheld, concealed, or distorted, and opponents threatened and intimidated. Clearly a great deal of money for someone is riding on the fate of APV - which no doubt explains why it could not be placed fully on the public agenda.

Looked at in the cold light of day, Hous- ton's largest and most solidly constructed public housing complex - paid for by tax- payers, structurally sound and not a mess of crime and vice - will be demolished in order

to allow potential developers full use of a site between River Oaks and the CBD, overlooking Buffalo Bayou, for expensive housing or office towers, and a few hundred units of public housing for the low-income elderly; and

- to force taxpayers to subsidize a com- plete revamping of the road, sanitation, water and lighting systems to 'make the site attractive to developers.'17

One proposal on the agenda is to create a tax increment zone whereby taxes on Fourth Ward land would be frozen for up to 40 years so that as development occurred, tax revenues over the base would be used for infrastructure improvements only in the zone itself. This not only would new Fourth Ward development not increase the tax base for Houston as a whole, it would ensure that taxes on any increased general costs - even those generated by the zone itself (police, fire, administration) - in addition to the normal increases generated by inflation. Another problem with this kind of financing is, that since there are no bonds, voters need not be asked to approve it: it can be done by fiat. Developers cannot lose under the current "redevlopment" plans for the Fourth Ward and APV.

The Cost to Taxpayers

At minimum, then, through various levels of taxation to support the city's storm systems, sanitary systems, water systems, gas systems, underground electric systems, and APV and the Fourth Ward, relocation costs for about 12,000 people, and new low-cost housing and Section 8 housing subsidies for an indefinite period of time. Taxpayer dollars are being used to alleviate costs to devel- opers and to help current owners sell their property. Do Houston's taxpayers really want to subsidize the enrichment of developers - and then also bear the cost (through federal tax subsidies) of relocat- ing and housing thousands of taxpay- ers?

Placing this issue on the public agenda finally guarantees a just solution. As John Kenneth Galbraith noted in a recent arti- cle, prosperity and the achievement of

Meanwhile, a pro-Fourth Ward petition is being circulated across the county which will be used to confront the city council on their decision to demolish APV. Last April, members of students from Rice Uni- versity, the University of Houston, and Texas A&M University gathered for a one-day charter to develop rehabilitation proposals for Allen Parkway Village (see "Allen Parkway Village Charter," Cite, Fall 1984, 4). The design problem was to save and rehabilitate APV, and thereby also preserve the Fourth Ward from large- scale redevelopment. (See page 16.) Rice University's School of Architecture continues its involvement in the Fourth Ward.

Union and Gulf Coast Legal Services to gain legal assistance. The ACLU, repre- senting the residents of APV on constitu- tional grounds, has prepared a brief oppos- ing the application to demolish. Stephen Frish, ACLU's lawyer, stated that class-action suits have been filed on behalf of tenants for public housing. In one case, racial steering is charged on behalf of black applicants who specifically requested residence at APV. In the other case, it appears that the Housing Authority of the City of Houston (HACH) has no record of some blacks who applied for public housing.

It is a sign of the community's strength that services and activities continue in the face of repeated efforts by the city and state and now, potentially, the federal govern- ment to demolish the area for redvelop- ment. For the residents, the University of Houston's Town and Allen Parkway Village, as well as for those involved in efforts to revitalise the existing community, reports of "in- evitable" development are unfounded pol- icymakers which only encourage unnecessary physical destruction and human dislocation.
welcomes APV, and it is no doubt the only community in the city that would.

The important point, however, is that issues such as the fate of APV and the Fourth Ward never do come onto the pub-
lic agenda. One or two city council meetings in which a proposal sells through does not constitute an agenda. By public agenda, I refer to the presentation of diverse points of view, careful study of the long-term consequences of a decision, not only in that section of the community immediately affected but on the entire community in future years.

Placing matters on the public agenda demands real debate, not attempts to silence controversy. That is, it demands a press which resists mindlessly repeating official pronouncements, it demands the community study the proposal which are not hand-picked to ensure a certain kind of response. And finally, it demands a community which perceives itself as a community and is will-
ing to become involved in deciding issues which affect the community.

For a democracy to exist, citizens must participate in the decision-making process, but this cannot happen if they are ill-
formed about issues. HACH's deceptively evocative attempts to silence controversy, its failure to mainatin APV, and its wildly lop-sided distortion of renovation courts can make it impossible for Houston's citizens to make responsible decisions now. Plac-
ing APV on the public agenda is the first of many steps that Houston must take toward the creation of a community which is not dominated by a few more than a few wealthy developers.

If we assess Houston by the way it treats its minorities in APV, the community emerges as seriously deficient. Blacks and Inochinese in APV and the Fourth Ward will be forced out of their homes as well as their communities, with all that that implies: displacement anxieties, increased death rate among the elderly, and increased community problems. If APV were like Nickerson Gardens in Los Angeles, where 5,000 people live in a pro-
cut which has a crime rate 12 times higher than other places in Los Angeles, then there might be reason to fear it down. But it is not.

There are other possibilities which would maintain the low-cost housing, permit tenants to become owners and to improve their property, ensure a fair return on the property to landlords (who have taken tax benefits for depreciation over the years), and save the community. Among these are cooperative ownership with tenants allowed to share ownership with a public body, as has happened in St. Louis. Such programs gradually reduce public monies, allow tenants a stake in the community, and enable them to make their housing better. Jarrett believes such programs are too advanced for Houston, but in fact, there are no reasons why the city could not explore them and begin to blame some raws. A com-
munderstrapped and dispersed is likely to have far more - and far more expensive - problems than one that is nurtured and helped to improve. Unless taxpayers blindly are willing to take on this enor-

mous cost burden, someone will have to talk publically about who pays and who reaps the profits in the Fourth Ward.