

# The Housing and Slum Clearance Act and its Effects on the Urban Planning Profession\*

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## *Abstract*

The Housing and Slum Clearance Act of 1949 transformed the planning profession. It had profound effects in six areas: the demand for planners, the exercise of planning techniques, the planners' self-image, the trappings of the profession, professional qualifying standards and the field's ability to adapt to changing circumstances. In the end, the single most important effect of the Act was its confirming in planners the desire to make the environment a better place.

**Keywords:** planning profession, urban planning, urban renewal, city and regional planning history

## **Introduction**

July 15, 1949 was a hot, humid day in Washington, D.C. when President Harry S. Truman, surrounded by more than twenty guests, solemnly signed the housing bill providing \$1.5 billion in loans and grants to localities for slum clearance, pledging to build 810,000 units of low cost shelter in the next six years and committing to a program of housing research to improve construction methods while reducing costs.<sup>1</sup> As he handed the single pen used in the signing to David Lawrence, the legendary mayor of Pittsburgh, he called for the work to begin immediately. (New York Times, July 16, 1949).

This ceremony marked the culmination of a multi-year battle to bring attention and dollars to bear on several of the nation's more pressing problems: substandard housing, slums and blight and, by implication, center-city decentralization. The law incorporated a formula engaging the federal, state and local governments in partnerships to attack the visible, physical evidence of obsolete land uses in American cities. A working coalition of social reformers, labor unions, chambers of commerce, city mayors, city planners, urban realtors and landowners, lawyers, economists and public administrators had contributed their knowledge, experience and values in forging and supporting the legislation. Furthermore, each group had its own understanding of the law's purpose and potential – the city planners were especially outspoken about their views (Wheaton,

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<sup>1</sup> Also included were commitments of \$325 million for farm housing and a \$500 million increase in the permitted amount of FHA mortgage insurance for single- and multi-family housing.

1949)<sup>2</sup>. However, they all had a common belief that the American know-how and industrial techniques that had helped win World War Two could be employed in peacetime to clear up a serious but certainly (in their view) correctable problem. Without reservation, they saw large-scale housing development undertaken by the private sector following rational land-use planning as the formula to rebuild the nation's tired cities as modern metropolises. They also believed that the public sector played an essential role in enabling site assemblage and reducing cost barriers presented by expensive but blighted land. This philosophy was the basis the Housing and Slum Clearance Act of 1949.

### *Performance Under the 1949 Act*

For a generation, the federal government would subscribe to and refine this approach. By 1962, William Slayton, Commissioner, Urban Renewal Administration, would report that the feds were supporting 1,210 renewal projects in 636 cities to the tune of \$3 billion (Slayton, 1962). Ten years later, James Lynn, Secretary of the U. S Department of Housing and Urban Development claimed 2,515 projects having a "total redevelopment value of improvements [in] excess of \$12.4 billion, 400,000 units of subsidized affordable housing and 236 cities spending \$22.5 million for planning grants. (Foote,74; Lynn, 39).

Although a small program relative to other government expenditures – defense spending dwarfed it – it became a lightning rod for criticism. The highly visible projects took more time to complete than anyone had imagined. Well-publicized failures in judgment regarding site acquisition revealed swaths of cleared but unsold land lying fallow in many cities. Poor choice of architects led to unattractive designs. And ineffective relocation programs destroyed some strong communities. Critics, such as conservative economist, Martin Anderson, used the program as whipping boy to forward a non-interventionist agenda while others such as writer Jane Jacobs who challenged its urban design assumptions, and sociologist Herbert Gans who questioned the contemporary definition of slums, launched an attack on the whole approach, especially the planners' implementation efforts (Teaford, 1999; Jacobs, 1961; Gans, 1965).

For twenty years, Congress modified the Act dramatically, attempting to refine it according to expert advice. Administrators, working by trial and error, tinkered with incentives. Theoreticians, especially planners and housing experts, forwarded substantial adjustments in technique. Various interest groups pushed an expanded scope to include them. The Housing Acts of 1954, 1959, 1965 and 1968 presented such significant changes that by the early Seventies, the legislation was a shadow of the original. In the end, it allowed up to 35% of the funding to be used for non-residential projects including central business district investment; favored such urban institutions as universities, hospitals and cultural centers in land purchases; funded city planning efforts mandating

<sup>2</sup> Wheaton revealed in the legislation: "The adoption of the Housing Act of 1949 is the most significant event in the development of city planning...It makes possible the replanning and reconstruction of American cities on a scale that was undreamed of a short decade ago.... This is an unparalleled challenge to local government and the city planning profession. For the first time, financial aids are available, broad in scope and adequate in amount to begin construction and reconstruction of cities in accordance with sound city plans"(Wheaton, 36).

master plans and community renewal programs (citywide redevelopment strategies); recognized citizen needs in required relocation and participation programs; initiated administrative reforms such as the Neighborhood Development Program allowing flexible, annual payments, and "Operation Breakthrough," bucking building code requirements; experimented with numerous financial incentives for investment in affordable housing and, most important, moved from reliance on project-oriented, large scale clearance schemes to area-wide rehabilitation and conservation efforts.

Nonetheless, by 1973, the high hopes of a quick fix had faded. The criticism of the Sixties had taken its toll. Bitter debates among politicians and policy analysts regarding appropriate methods remained unresolved. All concerned admitted that urban problems were more complex and intractable than the early diagnosticians had thought. The nation, with its now-dominant suburban majority had little sympathy for urban problems, especially those that either affected poor minorities or appeared to be soluble through decentralization. In this climate, a Republican president called a halt to the programs that had evolved from the 1949 Act and refashioned a new strategy embodied in the Housing and Community Development Act of 1974. It substituted federal block grants allocated by formula and used for locally determined projects. Labeled "devolution" by the Nineties, this approach restructured intergovernmental relations to reduce direct federal financial influence in cities. In general, the new solutions for urban problems emphasized people- not place-based policy with regard to poverty initiatives and considered the city only one functional element among many in a large metropolitan area. Emblematic were the switch from supply-creation to demand-enhancing housing strategies and the empowerment of the poor through support of neighborhood community development corporations (Winnick, 1995; Vidal, 1997). Also characteristic was the targeting of downtowns and controlling suburban development through growth management (Burchell, 1999).

### *The Role of Planners*

Planners are an important part of this 50-year epic. The passage of the Housing and Slum Clearance Act of 1949 brought them – for better or worse – to a new level of prominence in American life. They were heavily involved in all of the activities enumerated above. And on the occasion of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the law, an examination of its effects on the urban planning profession is appropriate. Such a review scrutinizes the complex interplay among policy-makers, urban renewal administrators and practitioners and educators – many of whom have multiple roles in this story. It also traces the growth of the profession in all its dimensions

### *Six Effects of the 1949 Act on Planning*

The Act had a profound influence on the planning profession. In fact, it transformed it entirely. This change is embodied in six features. First, the Act and its subsequent amendments created an unparalleled demand for trained planners. This, in turn, stimulated the expansion of educational capacity and, ultimately, altered the nature of instruction. Second, it allowed planners to exercise their techniques in a wide arena,

