

# A City without Slums

## *Urban Renewal, Public Housing, and Downtown Revitalization in Kansas City, Missouri*

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ABSTRACT. Most scholarly efforts to understand the political economy of postwar urban redevelopment have typically viewed urban renewal and public housing as “housing” programs that originated with the “federal” government. Yet this view is problematic for two reasons. First, it fails to specify the key actors and organized interests, especially real estate officials and downtown business elites, in the programmatic design and implementation of urban renewal and public housing. Second, this view does not fully acknowledge the dislocating and segregative effects of urban renewal and public housing on central city neighborhoods and the role these private-public initiatives played in shaping demographic and population patterns in the postwar era. I draw upon archival data and newspaper articles, real estate industry documents, government reports, and interviews to examine the origin, local implementation, and segregative effects of urban renewal and public housing in Kansas City, Missouri. I explore the role of the ideology of privatism—the underlying commitment by the public sector to enhancing the growth and prosperity of private institutions—in shaping the postwar “system” of urban economic development in which urban renewal and public housing were formulated and implemented. Focusing on the interlocking nature of race and class, I identify the critical links between urban renewal and public housing, and the long-term impact of these programs on metropolitan development in the decades after World War II.

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## I

**Introduction**

THIS PAPER EXAMINES THE ORIGIN, LOCAL IMPLEMENTATION, AND segregative effects of post-World War II urban renewal and public housing, using a case study of Kansas City, Missouri. During the 1930s and later, many American cities began to experience increasing physical deterioration of their core neighborhoods and commercial districts, forced concentration of inner city blacks into crowded areas, and loss of population and industry (Banfield and Wilson 1963; Silver 1984; Mollenkopf 1983; Teaford 1990). In the middle 1930s, urban leaders and real estate industry spokespersons, especially those affiliated with the National Association of Real Estate Boards (NAREB), began calling for the federal government to curb the ruinous effects of urban decay, revitalize the central city, and protect downtown real estate investments. Much of the real estate industry's lobbying efforts from the 1930s through the 1950s included the development of a series of policy proposals that could facilitate public acquisition of slum land in blighted areas for clearance and resale to private builders (Davies 1958, pp. 182–185). These proposals included state acts empowering municipalities to redevelop blighted areas, close public-private coordination of urban land-use and control, long-term federal loans to cities at low interest rates, and generous tax subsidies and write-offs for local redevelopers—proposals that in time would become a hallmark of urban revitalization schemes throughout the nation and profoundly affect population and demographic trends and the spatial transformation of central cities in the postwar era (Barnekov, Boyle, and Rich 1989, pp. 38–39; Gelfand 1975, pp. 151–156, 275–276; Hays 1985, chapter 5; Kleniewski 1984; Weiss 1980; see Wilson 1966 for an overview).

Up to now, most scholarly efforts to understand the political economy of postwar urban redevelopment have typically viewed urban renewal and public housing as “housing” programs that originated with the “federal” government (Hays 1985; Teaford 1990; Anderson 1964). In many accounts, scholars argue that federal officials and policy makers designed urban renewal and public housing to improve the living conditions of the poor and that the programs “failed” to meet their objectives (Bauman 1987; Von Hoffman 2000; Teaford 2000, 1990). I ar-

gue that this view is problematic for two reasons. First, it neglects to identify the key private actors and organized interests, especially real estate officials and downtown business elites, in the formulation and implementation of urban renewal and their opposition to public housing. As I show in this paper, the NAREB was a key lobbying force behind the development and passage of the urban renewal legislation, and a powerful opponent of public housing. The 1949 and 1954 Housing Acts provided federal funds for local redevelopment authorities to designate “blighted” areas, acquire and clear land, and then sell the land to private developers or local housing authorities for public housing. The Housing Act of 1954 changed the name of the program from “urban redevelopment” to “urban renewal,” empowered municipalities to redevelop blighted areas, and drastically reduced the funds to build public housing. As I show, the major outlines of the 1949 and 1954 Acts appeared at least as early as 1941 in the NAREB’s plans and reports for developing the means of teaming state action and private enterprise to carry out large-scale clearance of slum areas (Davies 1958, pp. 182–185; Weiss 1980). By the time the bills that were to become the Housing Acts of 1949 and 1954 had reached Congress, leading officials within the real estate industry had already set the basic agenda and legislation. There were disagreements over administrative issues but not basic policy goals.

Second, while researchers have investigated the failure of urban renewal and redevelopment programs to revitalize cities and urban neighborhoods, they have yet to examine the impact of urban renewal and public housing in concentrating the poor in the central city while allowing the middle class to escape to the suburbs. Using a case study of Kansas City, Missouri, I explore the impact of urban renewal and public housing on central city neighborhoods and the role these private-public initiatives played in transforming demographic, socioeconomic, and population patterns in the postwar era. In 1940, Kansas City contained approximately 430,000 residents living within 60 miles. The city was a clearly bounded spatial form that dominated, in both an emotional and economic sense, the areas surrounding it. Two decades later, urbanized development extended over 100 miles around the central city and contained a mix of independent cities, decentralized housing and business patterns, sprawling suburbs, and the emer-

gence of outlying centers of metropolitan dominance not controlled by the central city. By this time, more parts of the Kansas City area were losing population than were gaining, thus hollowing out the urban core and expanding what planners call the “hole in the donut.” For Kansas City, the two decades after World War II represented the beginnings of a long-term demise of the downtown as the economic nucleus of the city and the gradual eclipse of the central city by the suburbs. Today, its suburbs are no longer extensions of the central city but are autonomous and self-sufficient political entities that provide many of the educational and employment resources, shopping facilities, professional services, and entertainment amenities that once drew residents into downtown. My goal is to link the process of metropolitan transformation in Kansas City in part to the local implementation of the urban renewal and public housing programs. I identify the critical links between urban renewal and public housing and their impact on metropolitan development.

In the following section I discuss my theoretical orientation. I then examine the mobilization of real estate officials, central city businessmen, and the lobbying efforts of the NAREB for government assistance in remedying physical deterioration and reclaiming blighted land for private development. As I show, postwar urban renewal and redevelopment rested upon an ideology of *privatism* that assumed giving generous public subsidies to the private sector to designate, acquire, and clear residential land for redevelopment could reverse urban obsolescence. It was during the 1940s and 1950s that the term “downtown redevelopment” entered the glossary of city planning and implied an amalgam of land-use control techniques aimed at restoring economic vitality to the core city. Local real estate elites and city officials advanced the proposition that the Central Business District (CBD) is the heart of the metropolitan area and based all planning decisions on the need to preserve and enhance its development and prosperity (City Plan Commission 1956; Cookingham 1954, p. 144). By the early 1950s, it was fashionable for major urban elites and powerful private investors to champion government largess and call for federal intervention to revitalize central city property values. I then discuss the local implementation and segregative effects of urban renewal and public housing in Kansas City. Drawing upon archival data and

newspaper articles, real estate industry documents, planning reports, and interviews, I examine the key actors, important decisions, and political struggles surrounding urban renewal displacement and public housing site selection in the 1950s and 1960s.<sup>1</sup> Finally, I discuss the impact of urban renewal and public housing in contributing to the class and racial segmentation of U.S. society in the decades after World War II.

## II

### **Privatism and the Political Economy of Postwar Urban Redevelopment**

THROUGHOUT THE POSTWAR ERA, government officials and policy makers designed public policy to stimulate and bolster private investment. Their objectives were congruent with an ideology of privatism that views the private sector as the most effective mechanism for the delivery of public services, the creation of stable and growing “markets,” and the stimulation of local economic development. As discussed by Antonio and Bonanno (1997), Barnekov, Boyle, and Rich (1989), Squires (1994), and other sociologists, privatism is the underlying commitment by government to helping the private sector grow and prosper. It is an entrenched and deep-rooted belief in the supremacy of the private sector in nurturing societal development, with the public sector adopting a “hands-off” (*laissez faire*) strategy whose principal obligation is to encourage private profit. R. Allen Hays (1985, pp. 16–18) and Gregory Squires (1993; 1991, p. 197) identify three major assumptions that have historically been central to the ideology of privatism. First, because the desire for material well-being drives human productivity, the market must encourage and reward acquisitiveness and competitiveness. Second, “the free market is the most effective and least coercive mechanism for allocating goods and services since it harmonizes individual self interest with society’s collective development.” Third, “government’s role is to reinforce and supplement the market in regulating exchange in a manner that maximizes individual freedom and choice” (Squires 1993, p. 136).

As the notion of privatism implies, government policy making may be narrowed by a biasing or filtering process whereby the state selects

against some policy initiatives (e.g., market-centered public subsidies, tax breaks, and so on) while others are systematically ignored and never considered (e.g., direct state intervention and socialization of specific industries) (Hays 1985, p. 8). As Glasberg and Skidmore (1997, p. 21) recognize, the state and its policy making process are not neutral but “responsive to particular strategies and resources rather than to others; few of the possible policies and organizations surrounding a given issue receive serious political consideration.” Over time, this “strategic selectivity” (Jessop 1990, p. 333) perpetuates biases that have asymmetrical effects on the organization of state power, the unity and effectiveness of class segments, and the dominance of business elites (Glasberg and Skidmore 1997, p. 18; Barnekov and Rich 1977). Both local and national level governments and the ideology of privatism play a critical role in setting the rules and “greasing the skids” for business profitability (Feagin 1988, chapter 2). According to Barnekov and Rich (1989, p. 223), the ideology of privatism effectively depoliticizes policy making by systematically excluding all those voices and interests who reject the sanctity of the “free-market” and the desire to maximize private profits through the use of public policy and government subsidies. The effect is to insulate the government policy making process from public influence and scrutiny, stymie groups supporting alternative strategies, and promote policies that favor private actors and corporations rather than the public good.

As an ideology and political strategy, privatism has been the mechanism through which public policy and planning has traditionally reinforced social inequalities by dispensing public resources unequally (Gotham 2000; Squires 1994). In his historical account of urban development in the United States, Sam Bass Warner argues that “[w]hat the private market could do well, American cities have done well; what the private market did badly, or neglected, our cities have been unable to overcome” (1968, p. x). Evan McKenzie argues in *Privatopia: Homeowner Associations and the Rise of Residential Private Government* that “private developers and businessmen, rather than government, have long been the dominant forces in American urban planning” (1994, p. 7). The most activist public policies on housing, land-use regulation, and suburban development have historically involved insuring real estate firms and developers “against the conse-

quences of their own mistakes so that profits remained in private hands while losses were socialized" (p. 104). Similarly, Dennis Judd (1984, pp. 412–413) maintains that "American urban growth has always been dictated by private institutions and not by public policies," because public policy "follows rather than precedes the activities of the entrepreneurs who have changed the urban landscape." Sociologists John Logan and Harvey Molotch (1987) observe that urban "growth machines" are composed mainly of private real estate interests, with local government officials playing a subservient role, operating as facilitators of private economic growth and development. Extensive research by Joe Feagin (1988) in his case study of growth politics in Houston suggests that while government officials are important actors in the land development process, the role of government is largely promotional rather than regulatory or directive.

Until now, few scholars have specified the role of the ideology of privatism in determining the programmatic shape and local implementation of urban renewal or have examined the impact of the program on metropolitan development. A number of historical studies have documented the role of powerful actors, such as urban mayors (Teaford 1990), federal officials and "political entrepreneurs" (Mollenkopf 1983), and real estate officials, in the development of postwar urban renewal and redevelopment (Weiss 1980; see Hirsch 1993 and Mohl 1993 for overviews). However, these studies have failed to theorize the relationship between the actions of powerful political and economic actors and the broader political economy of urban redevelopment, as well as the impact of privatism in shaping the urban redevelopment policy making process. A number of neo-Marxian scholars have attempted to develop a theoretical understanding of the role of urban renewal and public housing in the process of capital accumulation and labor control (Sawyers 1984; Cummings 1988). While these scholars have highlighted the unequal effects of the "capitalist" context of public policy, their accounts have been reductionistic—overemphasizing the power of class at the exclusion of other salient factors (race, gender, politics, culture, and ideology, among others), and homogenizing and totalizing the interests of "capital" by stressing its "need" for public coordination to maximize profits. Marxian scholars have made impressive contributions to the study of

the land development process, the economic context of public policy, and the capitalist dynamics of urban credit markets (Gordon 1984; Storper 1984; Storper and Walker 1983; Castells 1977, 1983; Harvey 1973, 1976; Scott 1988). However, Marxian accounts have little to say about the political context of urban redevelopment and the ideology of privatism because these are not particularly relevant to the capitalist production process *per se*.

Although privatism draws inspiration from Marxian urban theory and analyses of capitalist dynamics, its pervasive influence as an ideology and “cultural tradition” (Warner 1987; Barnekov and Rich 1989) extends beyond Marxian categories and assumptions. Following Antonio and Bonanno (1997), Warner (1987), and Barnekov and Rich (1989), I view privatism as a set of cultural assumptions and social expectations that have shaped and constrained policy making and private and public actions within the political economy of urban redevelopment. It is the task of this paper to illustrate the impact of privatism in shaping the postwar “system” of urban economic development in which federal slum clearance programs—urban renewal and public housing—were formulated and implemented.

### III

#### **Urban Blight, Decentralization, and the Real Estate Industry**

BEGINNING IN THE 1930S, URBAN LEADERS BEGAN devising strategies to curb the ruinous effects of decentralization and blight that were endangering the economic stability and fiscal status of the central city. In New York, Chicago, Cincinnati, Philadelphia, Buffalo, and Atlanta, among other cities, real estate elites and planners recited the same litany of ills—declining population, dilapidated neighborhoods, declining property values and declining revenues from commercial and industrial sites, snarled traffic, and an increasingly “drab appearance” (see Teaford 1990 for an overview). The approach in Kansas City, Missouri reflected a national tendency to view deterioration of the CBD as symptomatic of a general urban malaise. The decay of the downtown was evident in figures showing that in the ten-year period after 1935 there had been a loss of 6% in assessed valuation in the CBD compared with a 0.5% loss in the entire city (City Plan Commission, Octo-

ber 1947; Anderson 1957, p. 128). Prominent real estate official J. C. Nichols argued that the CBD represented the “life-blood sections of the city,”<sup>2</sup> while City Manager L. Perry Cookingham believed that the CBD “is the core of operations—the nerve center —of the city and the metropolitan area” (Cookingham 1954, p. 142). For Cookingham, “blight” represented one of the most “difficult problems facing American cities today” that, if not arrested, would have corrosive effects “upon the value of the central business district in the city of the future” (ibid., p. 140). Throughout the 1930s and later, the official publication of the Kansas City, Missouri Real Estate Board, the *Kansas City Realtor*, published many articles and editorials lamenting the spread of blight and corrosive effect of slums on property values within the CBD. In many of its articles, the paper assailed blighted neighborhoods as physical threats to the financial viability of the CBD, an impediment to future growth and progress, and a cumbersome burden to the public treasury (“Campaign Against Decentralization,” 2/15/40, p. 3; “Factors in Decentralization,” 10/31/40, p. 4; “Remove Blight,” 3/11/43; “Rebuilding of Blighted Areas,” 6/17/43; “Real Slum Clearance,” 1/27/44; “New Plan for Slum Clearance,” 3/2/44).

On the national level, representatives of the NAREB bemoaned declining central city property values and recommended a vigorous attack on the problem of slum housing, obsolete building codes, pernicious tax policies, and oppressive state and local land-use regulations (Davies 1958, pp. 181–185). The future of central cities focused on two major fears: the decentralization of people and industry, and the social, economic, and political deterioration of the historic downtown. As early as 1932, the NAREB and its affiliated organizations called for government assistance to simplify and coordinate local building codes to promote new building and urban revitalization. In 1936, the NAREB’s Committee on Housing recommended that local government acquire land, undertake demolition, and “sell or lease it back to private enterprise for the construction of housing or business facilities. In no case would it be wise for local government to erect housing structures of any kind, either residential or business, and to attempt to operate them.” As the NAREB saw it, “if municipalities need financial help in carrying forward demolition and land clearance of slum areas, we suggest that Federal loans or

grants be available for such purposes" ("New Low-Cost Housing Plan Is Proposed," 1936, p. 2).

In 1939, the NAREB formed a research agency, the Urban Land Institute (ULI), to study and research the causes and consequences of urban blight and to identify the policy and financial tools needed to curb the ruinous effects of decentralization (Weiss 1980). The ULI undertook as its first major research project a study of blight and decentralization in 221 cities (Urban Land Institute 1940a). During the next two years the ULI published case studies on Boston, Cincinnati, Detroit, Louisville, Milwaukee, New York, and Philadelphia, recommending a plan whereby cities could condemn land in the blighted areas near the CBD and then sell or lease the land to private developers for replanning and rebuilding (Urban Land Institute 1940b; 1941a; 1941b; 1941c; 1941d; 1942a; 1942b). Government aid and subsidies, the ULI maintained, would be necessary to revitalize the central city, eliminate blight, and maintain profitable land sales and real estate markets. According to a 1940 report by the ULI,

[e]stablished business districts are affected adversely and severely when decentralization within a city takes place at an overrapid rate. But the causes of their loss of business volume may lie largely in the decay of residential areas whose former residents have moved farther out. Action with sufficient scope to ease the transition and prevent huge and unnecessary losses will require co-ordinated effort of business groups, owners of property, and governmental bodies ("Urban Land Institute Formed," 1940, p. 4).

By the early 1940s, local and national real estate elites openly called for federal and local government assistance in revitalizing downtown business districts and eliminating blighted areas ("Plan To Rebuild City Blighted Areas," 1941). In 1941, the Federal Housing Administration (FHA) released a report, *A Handbook for Urban Redevelopment for Cities in the United States*, proposing the use of federal subsidies and granting the power of eminent domain to local agencies to acquire and clear blighted land and sell it for reuse (Rowe 1995, pp. 177–178). A year later, at the January-February meeting of the ULI in Chicago, real estate industry officials recommended a "concerted onslaught on eliminating blighted districts in the nation's cities" through the creation of a "federal urban land commission" that would have the powers and funds "for the purpose of acquiring land in blighted areas for redevel-

opment by private enterprise” (“Land Institute Proposes Huge Replanning Program,” 1942, p. 2). In 1944, the NAREB proposed that state governments create “Municipal Redevelopment Authorities” which would have power of eminent domain and the right to issue redevelopment bonds (“New Plan for Slum Clearance,” 1944, p. 2). NAREB representatives at the congressional hearings on the General Housing Act of 1945 testified that federal financial assistance and subsidies should in the form of outright grants with no stipulations or conditions attached (Bauman 1981, p. 7).

During the 1930s and 1940s, members of the NAREB and downtown business elites agreed that state action—through eminent domain and public subsidies for private revitalization—was necessary to counter the specter of urban blight and obsolescence. Yet a number of problems forestalled private efforts to harness the legal and financial power of the local state to undertake slum clearance. First, private interests proved incapable of acquiring land in large enough parcels to permit large-scale revitalization. Second, the most desirable inner city land sought by downtown businesses tended to be residential land-use. Hence, private business did not have the organizational capacity or legal right to acquire such properties. Financing also proved to be a major problem since few private firms and redevelopers possessed the huge cash reserve necessary to pay for clearance and revitalization (Davies 1958, pp. 183–184). Thus, while real estate elites wholeheartedly supported public-private action for urban revitalization, the existing political structure in many local areas of the country did not possess the legal or fiscal capacity to undertake large-scale slum clearance and redevelopment during the 1930s and 1940s (Hirsch 1993, pp. 87–88; Gelfand 1975, pp. 151–156, 275–276; Hays 1985, chapter 5; Kleniewski 1984; Weiss 1980; Wilson 1966).

In many cities, public housing provided a partial answer to the problem of freeing inner city land for private development. The Housing Act of 1937 empowered local communities to create local housing authorities with the legal power of eminent domain to acquire privately-owned land for slum clearance and rehousing (McDonnell 1957; Bauman 1987, pp. 40–42). By the mid-1940s, a number of cities and states had passed legislation to enable local governments to designate, acquire, and clear “slum” areas and sell the land to private developers.

Yet early on there were opposing views over whether public housing legislation was supposed to be “housing” legislation or whether it was “slum clearance” legislation (Hoffman 1996, p. 425; Marcuse 1986; Jackson 1985, chapter 12). Proponents of public housing, including progressive housing advocates, social workers, and union officials, argued for the federal government’s building low-rent housing for the working and middle class (Bauman 1987, 1981). On the other hand, real estate industry and home building officials rejected a strong federal role and embraced a privatist vision of slum clearance with no government regulations on private redevelopment. The NAREB favored a trickle down model of housing distribution, where excess production of suburban housing would free up dwelling units at the lower end of the housing market for low-income families displaced by slum clearance (Keith 1973, pp. 28–39; Davies 1958, pp. 180–182; Gelfand 1975, pp. 184–204; Checkoway 1984).

Throughout and after the 1930s the NAREB and real estate elites attacked the view of public housing shared by labor unions, social workers, and housing activists as “creeping socialism” and opposed any federal building of low-income housing on the grounds that it would put the government in competition with private housing construction and real estate (Keith 1973, pp. 30–38, 94–95; Bratt 1986, pp. 336–337; Bauman 1981, p. 8). Seward H. Mott, head of the ULI, argued before Congress in 1945 that public housing is “a failure . . . It has not taken care of the people it should have, it is building political constituencies founded on shelter, it puts a premium on dependency . . . We don’t believe in it . . . and we challenge it as a social policy” (U.S. Senate 1945, p. 1603; Bauman 1981, p. 8). In January 1947, Herbert U. Nelson, Executive Vice-President of the NAREB, proposed that “no further funds should be appropriated for public housing” because “public housing is European socialism in its most insidious form” (“Nelson Proposes Eight-Point Plan to Beat Shortage,” 1947). The philosophy of the NAREB was that the private sector should dictate and control government aid. As Nelson put it in 1950, “I do not oppose government intervention in housing. I only believe that the powers of government should be used to assist private enterprise” (quoted in Abrams 1971, p. 154). By the early 1950s, the NAREB and its affiliate organizations had succeeded in defining the problem of urban blight

and decentralization as a “slum clearance” and urban redevelopment problem. Advocates for low-income housing for working class and poor families were relegated the margins of policy debates and organized labor, housing reformers, civil rights activists, and interracial housing advocates had little input on the development of subsequent housing legislation (Bauman 1981, 1987).

The Housing Acts of 1949 and 1954 represented the culmination of real estate industry lobbying efforts to curtail the production of public housing, create local redevelopment authorities with broad powers of eminent domain, and provide generous public subsidies for private redevelopment. Title I of the 1949 Act financed slum clearance. Title II raised by \$500 million the amount the Federal Housing Administration (FHA) was allowed to offer as mortgage insurance. Title III authorized the federal government to build 810,000 new public housing units over the next ten years and required local public housing authorities to demolish or renovate one slum dwelling for every public housing unit they built. Title IV provided for funds to conduct research into the economics of housing construction, markets, and financing. Title V reorganized and expanded the loan program initiated under the Farm Tenant Act of 1937 which allowed farmers to purchase and improve loans. The Housing Act of 1954 broadened the urban renewal program, increased funding for federal home financing activities, and established the first specific housing for elderly citizens through the public housing program. Due to opposition from the real estate industry, public housing never came close to the construction levels provided in the 1949 Act (810,000 units). By 1960, only 250,000 units had been made available (Mitchell, 1985, pp. 9–11). While the stated goal of Housing Acts of 1949 and 1954 was “[t]o provide a decent home and suitable environment for every American family,” urban leaders and real estate elites considered the Acts less as a “housing” program and more of urban “redevelopment” program.

#### IV

#### **Implementation and Dislocating Effects**

IN 1953, THE STATE OF MISSOURI CREATED THE Land Clearance for Redevelopment Authority (LCRA) for planning and administering local urban

renewal activities including slum clearance of blighted neighborhoods according to the Housing Acts of 1949 and 1954. While the preamble to the Housing Act of 1949 called for a “decent home” as the official goal of federal policy, local real estate officials and downtown business elites looked to the Act as a policy mechanism for eliminating blighted land-uses surrounding the CBD and using federal subsidies to engineer downtown growth (“Slum Law Legal,” 1954). The city government established the LCRA as a separate legal entity not directly responsible to City Hall or the city manager but to its own board, composed of leaders from the private sector (Land Clearance for Redevelopment Authority 1969). While the federal government provided the bulk of the funding, important decisions about site selection and size and project cost and duration were left to LCRA officials working closely with downtown business interests, including the Downtown Committee (renamed the Downtown Redevelopment Corporation [DRC] in 1952), the Building Owners and Managers Association, the Citizens Regional Planning Council, the Hotel Association, the Chamber of Commerce, and the Merchants Association (Bohanon 1971, pp. 66–67, 88–94, 100–109). The federal government supplied two-thirds of the \$80 million to finance Kansas City’s urban renewal activities from 1953 through the end of the 1960s. However, federal officials played a decidedly subordinate role, leaving key decision making to the LCRA while supplying vast financial resources for urban redevelopment.

The initiation of large-scale slum clearance and public housing building in the early 1950s represented the beginning of a dramatic socio-spatial transformation of the urban core that would continue over the next two and a half decades. In March 1950, a journalist for *Holiday* observed that “Kansas City is marked by sharp physical contrasts. There are tenements only a few blocks from skyscrapers, the landscaped lands of elaborate homes face vacant lots cluttered with billboards, and there are area shanties only a short distance outside the business district” (quoted in Brown and Dorsett 1978, p. 258). A few short years later urban renewal was reshaping the downtown core as residential neighborhoods were cleared to make way for new commercial and industrial land use (Cookingham 1958). Very early, urban renewal received unabashed support from the *Kansas City Times* and

*Kansas City Star* with such celebratory headlines as “A Dream City Without Slums” (12/19/52), “Out of the Rubble a New Kansas City Rises”(6/1/58), “Kansas City’s Battle on Blight is a Major Feat” (1/3/60), “To Redeem the Whole West Side” (7/6/53), “Praise Kansas City Renewal Projects”(5/2/59), “City Faces Great Era” (10/1/58), “Slums on the Retreat” (3/7/56), and “Slum War is On” (7/3/55) (Bohanon 1971, pp. 66–67, 88–94, 100–109). As one 1958 editorial proclaimed,

You see it everywhere around you, the building drama of the dynamic city. The earth vibrates with the great machines of progress. A wrecker’s weight smashes a wall. A few weeks later a new structure rises . . . A few men of vision believed that blight could be stopped. Today we can see the promise for the future. Civic enterprise is on the move. Before our eyes, a great city is being remade for the 20th century (“Out of the Rubble a New Kansas City Rises,” 1958).

So impressive were Kansas City’s slum clearance efforts that in 1958 *Look* magazine awarded the city the Community Home Achievement Award for reclamation and redevelopment of slum areas (“City Honored for Face Lift,” 1958; “Award for a Program that is Rebuilding a City,” 1958). In 1959, the American Institute of Architects (AIA) awarded the Kansas City AIA chapter the Citation of Honor Award, an honor given only fifteen times in the previous 102 years, for its comprehensive plan for downtown revitalization (“Architects Group Given High Honor,” 1959). During the 1950s Kansas City’s renewal efforts equally impressed federal and municipal leaders from around the country, including mayors, planners, and other elites from Lincoln, Tulsa, Milwaukee, Akron, New York, Omaha, Minneapolis, Louisville, Dallas, Indianapolis, Chicago, Denver, St. Louis, and Memphis (“Vitality in City Growth,” 1957; “City Impresses Urban Leaders,” 1959; “Praise Kansas City Renewal Projects,” 1959; “Hail Vital City Pride,” 1957; “Writers Laud City Renewal Action,” 1957; “Urban Plan as Model,” 1958).

Despite the fanfare and publicity, large-scale slum clearance did not benefit everyone living in the city. From the middle 1950s through the late 1960s, urban renewal uprooted thousands of residents living in the downtown core, transforming their residential neighborhoods into industrial and commercial land-uses. Table 1 lists individual urban re-

Table 1  
Urban Renewal Projects in Kansas City, Missouri, 1954-1969

	Project Duration	Acreage	Displacement				
			Blacks	Whites	Total	Businesses	
Northside	1953-60	6.6	88	432	520	71	
Attucks	1955-65	54.2	478	0	478	85	
South Humbolt	1956-65	27.6	28	203	231	66	
Eastside	1958-65	58.3	88	582	670	95	
Woodland	1963-65	46.3	58	162	220	23	
Garfield	1963-65	206.6	0	131	131	0	
Hospital Hill	1965-67	36.8	46	47	93	29	
W. Main	1964-66	3.3	0	27	27	58	
Trinity-St. Mary's	1966-72	22.5	1	159	160	48	
Manual	1966-72	86.5	320	4	324	113	
Town Fork Creek	1967-72	654.8	NA	NA	62	2	
Independence Plaza	1968-72	259.8	NA	NA	387	47	

Columbus Park	1968-72	146.5	0	59	59	18
Attucks East	1968-72	103.8	367	129	496	33
CBD	1968-72	284.7	0	6	6	14
East 23 <sup>rd</sup>	1968-72	857.8	NA	NA	218	4
Oak Park	1968-72	2241.1	NA	NA	5	0
12 <sup>th</sup> and Vine	1969-72	33.1	309	19	328	49
Total		5130.3	1783	1960	4415	755

Sources: Bohanon. 1971, p. 175; Land Clearance for Redevelopment Authority. Report on Urban Renewal Activities, 1955-72. LCRA to HUD, 2/12/73. "Status of Real Estate and Rehabilitation Activities in Kansas City's Uncompleted Urban Renewal Projects." Mid-America Urban Observatory, 2/74; Memorandum from A. J. Harmon, Executive Director and Council, LCRA, to Honorable Charles Hazley, Chairman, Plans and Zoning Committee. 2/12/73. X2814. Box 210. KC 250. Arthur A. Benson, II. Legal Papers. WHMC-KC; X353G. Comparison of Households Relocated by LCRA of Kansas City, Missouri From Clearance Urban Renewal Projects and Households Living in Area Prior to Clearance. Exhibit prepared by Yale Rabin. Sources: LCRA and Central Relocation Agency Annual Reports, Census of Population 1950, 1960, 1970, and Census Block Data. Box 201. KC 250. Arthur A. Benson, II. Legal Papers. WHMC-KC. In 1966, all on-going urban renewal projects were converted into the Neighborhood Development Program (NDP), a comprehensive program of neighborhood redevelopment where planning and budgetary priority was shifted away from financing and redeveloping slum clearance projects toward rehabilitation and conservation of housing.

newal projects launched in the 1950s through the late 1960s, showing the total acres of each individual project, and the number of blacks, whites, and businesses displaced in each urban renewal area.

As Table 1 shows, the LCRA launched eighteen urban renewal projects from 1953 to 1969. The first area designated for slum clearance was the Northside area, with the Attucks, South Humbolt, and Eastside urban renewal projects following consecutively during the 1950s (Land Clearance for Redevelopment Authority 1954). The purpose of the 54.2 acre Attucks project was to clear predominantly black neighborhoods adjacent to the downtown. The 6.6 acre Northside area was cleared to provide parking lots near the downtown while the 85.9 acres cleared for the South Humbolt and Eastside renewal projects were to expedite construction of the downtown freeway loop (Land Clearance for Redevelopment Authority 1969; Anderson 1957; "A Northside OK," 1953; "Old Northside Gone," 1954; "Attucks Ordinance In," 1954; "East Side Renewal Project Gets OK," 1956; "Old North Side Gone," 1954; "Start Near on Huge City Job," 1956; "Modern Look for Northside Horizon," 1957).

Besides the Attucks, Northside, South Humbolt, and Eastside urban renewal projects, the LCRA initiated fourteen more major redevelopment projects in the 1960s. These included the Woodland (46.3 acres), Garfield (206.6 acres), Hospital Hill (36.8 acres), West Main (3.3 acres), Trinity-St. Mary's (22.5 acres), Manual (86.5 acres), Town Fork Creek (654.8 acres), Independence Plaza (259.8 acres), Columbus Park (146.5 acres), Attucks East (103.8 acres), the CBD itself (284.7 acres), East 23<sup>rd</sup> Street (857.8 acres), Oak Park (2241.1 acres), and 12<sup>th</sup> and Vine (33.1 acres) (Land Clearance for Redevelopment Authority 1969). As Table 1 shows, urban renewal displaced thousands of individuals and businesses, including 1783 blacks, 1960 whites, and 755 businesses. Of those urban renewal projects reporting data on numbers of displaced blacks and whites, 48 percent of those displaced were blacks while whites made up 52 percent of displacees.

To qualify for federal urban renewal subsidies through the Housing Acts of 1949 and 1954, municipalities had to insure that a sufficient supply of replacement housing would be available to families displaced by slum clearance (Gelfand 1975, chapter 6; Hirsch 1993, pp. 85–86; Pynoos, Schafer, and Hartman 1973). Throughout the 1950s

and up to 1964, the Housing Authority of Kansas City, Missouri (HAKC) segregated its public housing residents by race. By 1954, the HAKC had three major public housing projects—Guinotte Manor (454 units) and Riverview (232 units) built in 1954 and 1952 “for whites” and T. B Watkins Homes (462 units) built in 1953 for “Negro families.” Projects in planning or under construction during this time included Wayne Miner Court (738 units) for blacks and Chouteau Court (140 units), West Bluff (139 units), and Pennway Plaza (250 units) for whites and minorities other than blacks (Housing Authority of Kansas City, Missouri 1953, 1956, 1957; “Three Public Housing Sites on Fringe of Downtown Area,” 1957).

The question of where to build public housing was a source of bitter controversy during the 1950s and 1960s. While middle class whites opposed predominantly black public housing in their neighborhoods, in many cases middle class blacks objected to the same public housing in their own neighborhoods, revealing that class as well as racial conflicts were central to the public housing controversy. In response, the HAKC built all of its housing developments within six miles of each other, thus concentrating public housing in the city. During this time, the Greater Kansas City Urban League and the local African American newspaper, the *Kansas City Call*, repeatedly voiced opposition to the HAKC’s segregative public housing site selections and demanded that housing authority officials build public housing on vacant land outside the city (“Interracial Housing Project in Order,” 1953; “Speaking the Public Mind,” 1952; “Oppose a Housing Sit,” 1950). In 1953, the *Kansas City Call* castigated the “rigid pattern of segregation which the Housing Authority has adopted in the operation of Kansas City’s low rent housing projects.” It is “unfair and unrealistic,” as the *Call* lamented, for the HAKC to expect the Watkins project “to take care of the housing needs all over the city.” A year later, the *Call* expressed outrage at the HAKC’s policy that black families displaced by urban renewal and public housing construction “will be housed in the Watkins project which means that some of the families in the central Negro area which would normally have secured housing there will not be accepted because there will not be enough units to take care of all” (“Segregation in Housing Must Go,” 1954, p. 22).

Like other cities, Kansas City’s urban renewal clearance activities fre-

quently did low-income residents and racial minorities substantial harm, forcing them to sever neighborhood ties, and channeling them into inferior and substandard housing and segregated neighborhoods. During the late 1960s through the 1970s, the Missouri Commission on Human Relations, the City's Temporary Advisory Commission on Housing (TACH), the City's Model Cities agency, and the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) cited the LCRA for numerous and repeated violations of federal regulations and civil rights statutes in its relocation program.<sup>3</sup> Based on a series of investigations, in June 1973, HUD found that the LCRA was violating the 1964 and 1968 Civil Rights Acts for engaging in discriminatory relocation activities. HUD concluded that the "LCRA's urban renewal program has contributed to the development and perpetuation of racial housing patterns [and] has and will concentrate large segments of the population by racial . . . characteristics."<sup>4</sup>

A number of residents I interviewed recalled the destabilizing effect of urban renewal on city neighborhoods. For example, a former assistant city manager and lifelong resident remembered that "urban renewal became the synonym for 'black removal' and it broke the back of black stable neighborhoods" (Alvin Brooks [pseud.], interview by author). Other residents remembered how urban renewal clearance destroyed many thriving black businesses and neighborhood convenience stores in the southeast fringes of the CBD. As the following black residents recalled:

There had been semi-economic centers for black businesses that were around 12th Street, 18th Street, coming up Vine, say to 25th Street because I remember Barker's Market, Johnson's Drug Store, and a cab company and a bunch of stuff like that. And all of the clientele was in walking distance, mainly because in the 1940s and early 1950s . . . people lived closer together. With urban renewal and people moving out, they lost their clientele (Mary Jacqueline [pseud.], interview by author).

All up and down Vine, which is two blocks away from here, there were thriving black businesses. There was a cab company, matter of fact there were two cab companies. One near 25th and Vine, the other at 24th and Vine. There was a thriving grocery store, a drive-in drug store, there were thriving businesses along here. But no more, they are just not here. The matter of urban renewal has not always served well the black community (Brian Charles [pseud.], interview by author).

I remember many people called the urban renewal years urban removal years, because what occurred was large-scale removal of neighborhoods that were abolished under the guise of economic development and the core fabric of those communities was forever changed. . . . I remember very vividly those years because I was a product of the 1960s and was very active in the activities of those days, where there were dramatic demonstrations and protests regarding persons displeased with the plight of blacks living in the inner city. And so, when urban renewal, compounded with the introduction of the freeway system, came about little did many people realize the resulting impact and effect it would have on the destruction of core communities (Martin Fletch [pseud.], interview by author).

As these excerpts show, residents were familiar with the dislocating effects of urban renewal, the devastating impact of the program on inner city neighborhoods, and efforts of local groups and activists to halt the disruption of neighborhoods. In addition to the displacement of residential neighborhoods, a number of residents remembered how small business owners were forced to move to make way for parking lots and redevelopment for larger, nationally-based businesses. For some residents, the loss of small businesses and neighborhood grocery stores was equally traumatic as the displacement of people and houses was. Urban renewal not only dislocated residents but disrupted entire neighborhoods as residents were now forced to travel outside their neighborhoods to obtain groceries, clothes, and other services.

In Kansas City and other cities, urban renewal and public housing worked at cross-purposes with one another. The former displaced poor residents from their housing while the later concentrated them into crowded and deteriorating neighborhoods. No matter how much government officials proclaimed the Housing Act of 1949 to be a policy for a "decent home in a suitable living environment," the consequences of urban renewal were the removal of housing and the concentration of the poor in the central city. Different groups of actors had different motivations in attacking the problems of urban blight and obsolescence but effect was the same. Urban renewal officials and private real estate interests were motivated by profits and economic gain and public housing administrators segregated displaced residents in a racially unequal fashion. In many cities, including San Francisco, Chicago, and New York, blacks bore the burden of the dislocating effects of urban renewal, as local authorities converted slum

clearance into “Negro clearance” along the very lines black leaders had feared (Gelfand 1975, p. 212; Hirsch 1983, 2000). Other ethnic groups suffered as well, including predominantly Italian-American residents in Boston’s West End (Gans 1962) and Mexican-Americans in the Bunker Hill neighborhood in Los Angeles (Hines 1982). Although racial discrimination and segregation undoubtedly played a major role in shaping the experience of blacks and other ethnic and racial minorities, they remained closely intertwined with class. The urban poor of all races and ethnic groups were more likely to be displaced than those blacks and other minority groups living in affluent and upscale neighborhoods. Racial motivations on the part of government officials and profit motivations on the part of private developers combined to transform the central city and cement patterns of racial and class segregation in the postwar metropolis.

## V

**Discussion and Conclusion**

IN SUM, THE TWO DECADES AFTER 1950 REPRESENTED AN ERA of slum clearance and public housing that dramatically transformed Kansas City’s urban core, clearing away thousands of dwellings and converting low-income neighborhoods into industrial and commercial land-use. As this paper shows, in the 1950s and 1960s the city experienced a series of unprecedented socio-spatial changes, including a reorientation of downtown land-uses, large-scale slum clearance, and a restructuring of city government activities. In 1951, the City Council revised the 1923 zoning ordinance and enacted a minimum housing code. Land annexations in 1947 and 1950 extended the city’s geographical size from 59.64 to 81.62 square miles, the first sizable additions to the city’s area since 1909. A huge 1947 bond program passed, the first since 1930, to expedite the construction of new parks and recreation areas, zoning, public buildings, and slum clearance. Redevelopment bonds approved by voters in 1952 and 1954, in addition to federal urban renewal money, helped pay for land clearance in slum areas. By the 1960s, the Missouri Department of Highways and Transportation (MDHT) was building Interstates 70, 29, and 35 and the South Midtown Freeway (the Bruce R. Watkins Drive) to reach beyond the city’s hinterland to facilitate suburban access to the downtown. In the

three-year period from 1947 to 1950, the city resurfaced more than 228 miles of streets and by 1957 had removed all street cars to make way for the dominance of automobile transportation and the creation of an automobile-dependent populace (Cookingham 1956, 1957).

Moreover, by 1970 it was painfully clear that the optimism and promises of urban redevelopment touted by central city businessmen and real estate elites during the 1950s and 1960s had not been fulfilled. Urban renewal was supposed to reverse central city decline, counteract decentralization trends, revitalize blighted neighborhoods, and create a "city without slums," as the *Kansas City Star* proclaimed in a February 1953 editorial ("For a City Without Slums," 1953). Yet by 1970, population and settlement patterns graphically illustrated the steadily decreasing supply of affordable inner city housing, widespread displacement, and flight of people and business. In 1970, over a half million city residents lived in 316 square miles sprawling more than three counties. Two decades earlier in 1950, 457,000 residents had been living in 20 percent of the 1970 area. Employment trends in the CBD told a similar story: from 1963 to 1976, total employment in the CBD dropped 19 percent, from 61,144 in 1963 to 49,585 by 1976.<sup>5</sup> Obviously, urban renewal had not halted decentralization trends but reinforced the exodus of people and industry, creating more urban blight and exacerbating the urban housing problem.

While specific renewal programs differed from city to city, the types of activities and dislocating effects were remarkably consistent. Herbert Gans's (1962) case study of the "urban villagers" in Boston's West End, Arnold Hirsch's (1983) study of Chicago, and Ronald Bayor's (1988) analysis of Atlanta show that the urban renewal program contributed greatly to clearing vast areas of slum housing in many CBDs, replacing low-rent residential housing with high rise-office towers and luxury apartments. In New York City, as Robert Caro (1975) points out in *The Power Broker*, Robert Moses eagerly exploited the power of eminent domain in the Housing Act of 1949 to launch a series of slum clearance programs that dislocated thousands of people and, in turn, produced new pockets of deterioration and blight. Although urban leaders used urban renewal to attack substandard housing conditions, very few resources went to improve deteriorated or dilapidated housing or "renew" slum neighborhoods (Greer 1965, p. 3; Jacobs 1961; Hartman 1966; Hartman and Kessler 1978; National Commission on

Urban Problems 1969, p. 153). Nationally, the program destroyed thousands more units than it replaced and dislocated tens of thousands of small businesses and residents (Friedland 1982, pp. 81, 85, 195; Weiss 1980; Kleniewski 1984).

In the 1960s and later, the character of urban redevelopment underwent a change in emphasis from large-scale clearance to neighborhood conservation and preservation. Critics such as Jane Jacobs (1961) and Herbert Gans (1962) attacked urban renewal for destroying neighborhoods while Martin Anderson (1964) blasted the principle that government could take away one person's property and give it to another for private gain. In Boston (Gans 1962), San Francisco (Hartman and Kessler 1978), and other cities, resident dissatisfaction with displacement helped spawn combative coalitions of housing activists, civil rights organizations, and historical preservationist groups dedicated to halting slum clearance. In 1974, the federal government discontinued the urban renewal program amid widespread urban protest and neighborhood discontent surrounding the destabilizing effects of the program on inner city communities (Von Hoffman 2000; Teaford 2000; Hirsch 1983; Weiss 1980). In the 1970s, the public housing program survived but other programs—especially Section 8—became the core components of low-income housing policy (Gotham and Wright 2000). In the 1980s and 1990s, federal resources for local economic development were reduced and local governments have been encouraged to be more self-reliant in forming strategic partnerships with the private sector and to compete with other cities to attract capital and jobs (Feagin 1988; Barnedov and Rich 1989; Anderson and Wassner 2000; Fisher and Peters 2000). At the beginning of the twenty-first century there is increasing interest among planners, policy makers, and government officials for developing new methods to revitalize cities and a search for new frameworks to guide economic growth and remedy the problems of uneven development.

### Notes

1. I use data from four major sources to examine the redevelopment of Kansas City, Missouri and the implementation of postwar urban renewal and public housing. First, I examined public documents and planning reports issued by Kansas City, Missouri's City Plan Commission, the Housing Authority

of Kansas City (HAKC), the Land Clearance for Redevelopment Authority (LCRA), and the City Development Department, among other agencies. Second, I searched three local newspapers (the *Kansas City Times*, *Kansas City Star*, and the *Kansas City Call*) and a number of local archives for material about public housing and urban renewal. Third, I accessed every weekly issue of the *Kansas City Realtor*, the official publication of the Kansas City Real Estate Board, from 1925 to 1985 (the last year published) for data on the local real estate industry and the role of business elites in redevelopment efforts. Finally, this study draws on data from 21 in-depth interviews conducted in 1996 with local residents who had first-hand knowledge and experience with the dislocating effects of urban renewal upon city neighborhoods and local businesses. I gathered these interviews through a snowball sample that included seven white males, three white females, seven black males, and four black females. Most of these interviewees were either former or current real estate agents, civil rights activists, neighborhood coalition leaders, city planners, church leaders, block club heads, and the like. To protect the confidentiality of interviewees I use pseudonyms for nonpublic persons quoted in the paper.

2. Nichols, J. C. 1948. "Planning for Permanence." Speech before the National Association of Real Estate Boards. New York City, November 18, 1948. J. C. Nichols Company Records. KC 106. folder 42. Western Historical Manuscript Collection - Kansas City, Missouri (WHMC-KC).

3. Commission on Human Relations 1974; Metropolitan Planning Commission 1971; Department of Housing and Urban Development. 1972. Final Investigative Report. Region VII, Kansas City, Missouri. 07-72-11-024-300. Complaint filed by United Citizens City-Wide PAC Organization on 11/22/71. HUD complaint investigation of LCRA from 12/15/71 - 3/15/72. X2659. Box 209; *Hospital Hill Conservation Program, et al., Plaintiffs, vs. City of Kansas City, Missouri, et al., Defendants*. Filed on June 19, 1972. RE: Administrative Complaint, Workable Program Recertification. X649C. Box 202; Memorandum from William R. Southerland, Area Director, HUD, to Al Harmon, Executive Director, LCRA. RE: Relocation Deficiencies. 12/27/72. X2813. Box 210; Memorandum from A. J. Harmon, Executive Director and Council, LCRA, to Honorable Charles Hazley, Chairman, Plans and Zoning Committee. 2/12/73. X2814. Box 210; Model Cities Field Review of Kansas City, Missouri. 9/13/71 (survey). Thomas F. Brinton, Assistant Director, Planning and Relocation Branch, HUD. X2819A. Box 210; KC 250, Arthur A. Benson, II. Legal Papers. WHMC-KC;

4. Memorandum from Walter Cade, Jr., Equal Opportunity Division, HUD, to William Southerland, Area Director. 6/11/73. Re: NDP Application (10532 Determination). X2817. Box 210. KC 250, Arthur A. Benson, II. Legal Papers. WHMC-KC.

5. Table F-2. "Changes in CBD Employment 1963, 1976." Box 334. KC 250. Arthur A. Benson, II. Legal Papers. WHMC-KC.

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