Dear Readers,

The study of urban space is a multi-dimensional project—in any department whose purpose it is to facilitate that study, the paths taken and the results arrived at will necessarily be as wide-ranging and varied as the subject itself.

In this spirit, it is my pleasure to present to you the Spring 2014 issue of the Hunter College Urban Review. We have a varied and eclectic collection of content this semester—ranging in perspective from the personal to the analytic, in location across the globe, in topic from the technical to the philosophical, in time from the recent past to the distant future.

But though they do it in very different ways, all the authors in this semester’s issue ask us to grapple with questions inspired by the spaces we live in. Leah Feder reminds us of the influence of past eras, directing our attention to how early debates among housing advocates informed public housing policy throughout the twentieth century, taking particular notice of the case of New York City. Ian Gray unfolds an account of the informal spaces of the Brazilian countryside, showing how informality becomes both a legal status and a way of life. Jill Ryan, with an overview of sanitation policy in India, also looks to the question of the marginal and informal, but with a greater focus on concrete solutions. Jacob Bogitsh steps further back, analyzing from a macro level the interplay of economic policy and poverty levels in two adjacent but contrasting South American countries. David Leyzerovsky continues the examination of neoliberal policy, returning us to New York City to recount the story of the ARC tunnel and the political calculus that resulted in its demise.

The rest of the issue is devoted to more personal perspectives. In an op-ed, Sylvia Morse exhorts the planners and policy-makers implementing safer traffic laws to avoid allowing new enforcement measures to fall prey to the same patterns of racial injustice that characterize ‘broken windows’ policing. The alumni interview gives us an introduction to Nava Sheer, an urban planner who began her career here at Hunter but now works in one of the most contentious regions of the world. Professor Jill Gross shares insights from her work, published and in progress, comparing immigrant voting policies in different European cities. And this semester’s student profile brings us newly-minted planner’s ruminations on his chosen profession, and his hopes moving into the future.

The variety of style and topic in this issue reflect, I hope, the variety of interest and perspective of those interested in exploring and understanding cities. May you find, dear reader, something in these pages that illuminates the city from a new and exciting angle.

Sam Chodoff
Editor-in-Chief

Contents

Faculty Interview: Jill Gross
Annabelle Meunier

NYCHA and the 1937 Housing Act
Leah Feder

Interview: Nava Sheer
Victoria Curtis

Fecal Matters: Toilet Troubles in India
Jill Ryan

The Incompatibility of Neoliberalism with Public Works
David Leyzerovsky

Studio Spotlight
Queens Tech

One Planner’s Future
Jake Rubinsky

Studio Spotlight
Beyond Resilience in Rockaway

Neoliberalism and the Poor: Examples from Colombia and Venezuela
Jacob Bogitsh

Studio Spotlight
At Home in Brownsville

Edge of the Asphalt: A Glimpse into Brazil’s Landless Workers’ Movement
Ian Gray

Endnotes

Policing Vision Zero: The Conversation
Sylvia Morse
You’re a recent recipient of the Fulbright Schulman European Union award, which gave you the opportunity to compare government approaches to making political participation accessible to migrant populations, specifically in London and Dublin. Your chapter in the recently published Governing Cities covers similar themes in London, Toronto, and Copenhagen. Can you tell us more about your interest and involvement in the political roles of immigrant and migrant communities?

My interest revolves around the fact that with globalization, populations are becoming much more mobile, and you have lots of people who are in cities, but aren’t necessarily citizens of those cities. They are paying taxes, they are using the city, and they’re invested in the city, but they have no official way of engaging, they can participate, but they can’t vote. But I discovered that there are some cities outside of the U.S. that have non-citizen voting rights. I had been doing research for the book, which focused on cities that were diverse global cities. I wanted to look at the Scandinavian countries, because they had no-citizen voting rights, meaning that you couldn’t vote in national elections, but anyone who has established residency in Copenhagen has the right to vote in local elections. The same is true in Ireland, the same is true in Amsterdam, Toronto has been trying to pass a similar law, and in London it doesn’t exist. I was interested in the contrast. What happens if you create the channels: do people walk down them, does it matter? Do people vote more when they’re given the opportunity to vote? Do people run for office when they’re given the opportunity? I’ve basically been interested in globalization, diversity, and how cities adapt to the fact that their populations are much more diverse and much less permanent.

What advantages do cities stand to gain by enabling their immigrants to be able to engage more fully? Are there noticeable results?

The results aren’t as noticeable as I wish they would have been. I found these were intervening variables and the Fulbright was a great opportunity because I could go and immerse myself in two cities for a reasonable amount of time. Underlying a lot of my research is the idea that Henri Lefebvre had about the “right to the city.” As an individual living in a city, I believe that I have rights to that city. Some cities are more than 50% immigrant. As an immigrant, when the majority of the population in the city have no power; they have a voice, but are not as acknowledged in the decision making process. Ideologically, this is a growing problem, and it’s getting to even be worse when more and more people are able to jump around to different places. If cities don’t figure out more effective ways of communicating to those that are living here now, we’re going to have a real disconnect in the systems.

The comparison of Copenhagen and London showed me that you have to do more than just say you can vote, you can run for office. That’s not enough. You have to make it meaningful. Copenhagen invested a lot in providing capacity skills, and what I mean by that is really translated. People knew how to use the channels, and used them. In the case of Copenhagen I suspect that people are much more likely to feel that they have a system that cares about them, and they’re providing them tools to navigate that system.

Inam has had non-citizen voting rights since the 70s, and along with that, rules that say that an immigrant can run for local council seats, and they’ve rarely had an immigrant win a seat on the local council in Dublin (the capital city). That says a lot to me. There are a lot of people both in government and outside who had no idea that that was even a rule in place. Having a system with no support network around it, with no information or training to enable people to navigate through it, without buy-in from the state or civil society, makes the entire process hollow. You have to be pro-immigrant, recognize the value of immigrant voices politically, socially, and economically, in order for these systems to be effective.

How would you like to see governments apply the research you’ve done? Have you been approached by any localities interested in the implications?

Actually, a whole team of municipal workers who had read the chapter in the book came over from the Netherlands to talk with me. So I know people are listening. I’m pretty hopeful it will have some impact. It’s more likely to be picked up by immigrant groups themselves, who advocate about what’s needed to engage communities politically. And part of the findings are relevant not simply for immigrants, but for most disfrocked, poor communities, for citizens who don’t vote, who don’t participate. A lot of that has to do with this lack of understanding about how the system works, and where they have openings to promote change. I feel that that piece of education is missing these days.

After conducting this research in Europe, do you return to New York with a different perspective? How do New York and the wider U.S. compare in the way governments engage immigrant populations?

There is a lot of variance. I haven’t done any of this research in the U.S. and part of that has to do with the fact that I find it quite challenging. Even in a place like New York, it’s very difficult just to get data from local elections in order to even begin the dialogue on how to fix low voter turnout. You have to know which communities aren’t participating and why in order to conduct meaningful research. The U.K. was an environment where I felt like what I was doing was making a difference. I admit to feeling more disconnected in the U.S. and less trustful of the politicians in this system than I did in the other places that I’ve lived.

What kinds of knowledge or values do you hope to impart in teaching the courses that you do, and what are some things that you have learned from your students?

That’s why I love being in this department, because students in this department come with experience. In terms of teaching, I learned [Paolo] Freire not by reading Freire but by doing it; when I first started teaching, I felt like I needed to control everything in the classroom, and I’ve learned that it’s much more interesting to loosen the reins a little bit because you learn most effectively by experiencing things. The students themselves have taught me a lot. I really enjoy teaching courses like Workshop because I feel that that’s how people really learn. In terms of the kinds of things I want to impart to students: to me the greatest thing is when a student really finds their own voice, not repeating what I have to say but really connects with or disconnects from whatever the materials are. In the past I’ve found readings that are designed intentionally to annoy, to irritate, because we learn much more when are given readings that challenge our values. If you can challenge, think critically about what you’ve absorbed, then I’ve done my job.

Annabelle Meunier is a student in the Master of Urban Planning program at Hunter College. Her interests are in community planning, environmental sustainability, and cultural affairs. She expects to graduate in Fall 2014.
Today I sat for many hours at the National Planning Commission planning for a road to be widened in Northern Israel. The plan proposes to re-channelize a major road instead of traffic lights to make it safer and to alleviate congestion. On paper that sounds great, but the reason we got involved is because this road is an important route that connects the central country to the north. It runs through an area that is populated by mostly Arabs. There are constant issues between Israeli Jews and Arabs. Our objection was that this is a road that services a local population of 100,000 people and the planners had not addressed the needs of the local population. They were looking at the needs of the people who will use the road, through traffic, instead of the people who live in the area that the road runs through. They were just interested in getting the road built as soon as possible. The reason why we get involved with these issues is because the locals don’t always have the means to advocate for themselves.

What is your role at Bimkom?

I deal primarily with transportation issues. Any plan that we are working on, even if it’s not a transportation plan, there are usually some aspects that have to do with transportation.

That’s my side job. My main job is I manage the GIS. I am generally making maps for all of our reports and all of our objections to the state. I work with all the planners and architects to better understand the projects they work on and give them basic data. We are always working on several different ongoing projects. One is ‘Palestinian neighborhoods in East Jerusalem’. Next is affordable housing. And we have a large program serving Palestinian villages in Area C in the West Bank, which is under Israeli military and civilian authority.

Why is there a need for a plan for the Negev Bedouin communities?

Ever since 1948, Bedouin communities in the Negev desert region of southern Israel have been put into one geographic area called “the desert.” In the 1980s, Bedouin communities were moved by the government into towns. It was a huge experiment that did not work. It is comparable to Native American reservations where people were either forcibly or non-forcibly moved with mostly negative outcomes. There was a change in cultural status and norms. Change did not happen naturally. That came with a lot of social issues—high unemployment, aggregation, and poverty.

The government realized they had made a huge mistake. So they tried, unsuccessfully, to change the line of thinking. There were 46 villages in 1980s that refused to move into these townships. They wanted to stay on their land. The Israeli government never officially approved their status as villages. Even though they had lived there for decades, there is no official status. They are not municipalities. Therefore there is no planning and a lack of infrastructure—no water, no electricity. People are living on generators, solar panels, but there is no official infrastructure provided by the government. In the 1990s, there was a push to approve another 11 out of 46 communities. Those communities, despite the fact that they are recognized, still do not have infrastructure. That experiment is also a failure. Bimkom is trying to work with the government to offer alternate plans.

The government views the land that the 35 unrecognized villages are sitting on as public land, and they want to move them off the land into recognized villages that still do not have proper planning or infrastructure. We developed a plan that takes into account culture, housing, land, and ownership.

Usually, most land is handed from father to son. Everyone still lives together in a tribal familial style. We took the land into account when developing our plan. Our goal is to allow as many people as possible to stay in their current location. We help them develop plans for their growth. Even though these villages look different—they have their own networks, roads, systems, and social services. Even though they are unrecognized, they have many of the aspects that a city or village has. They can be planned. There is potential.

Do you think transportation planning has helped shape interaction between Arab communities and Jewish communities? How?

It depends on where. Many times the impact has been very negative; transportation planning has often separated interaction. But in some situations, it has helped promote integration. For example, the Jerusalem Light Rail opened two years ago. It runs from Arab neighborhoods and continues to the central city. The Arab communities near the rail line had never been directly connected to the downtown Jerusalem central city—Palestinian East Jerusalem neighborhoods have their own public transit and Israelis have theirs, and they never met—but now we have this new light rail that on any given day exercises interaction between the two groups. Interactions are not always positive, but they’re happening, which I see as an overall positive.

In the US, cities often hear the scars of planning decisions that favored one group of people over another—have such discriminatory planning decisions been a factor in Israel?

Listen, it works the same way as it does anywhere. The rich are favored over poor. Professionals are favored over blue-collar workers. Jews are often favored over Arabs. This happens on a large scale, because Arabs tend to live in their own cities separately. Even within Jewish communities, there is discrimination between Jews who came from Africa vs. Jews who came from Europe. It’s not seen as much because there is integration between these different nationalities. There is discrimination within Jewish populations but its not as overarching as the one between Jews and Arabs.

You’ve worked in the public, private, and nonprofit sectors. How has your experience in each sector changed your understanding of your role in urban planning?

My experience in NY working for the Bronx Borough President’s Office was dynamic and exciting. I felt like I was working for the public, but the work that I did for the agency was responding to the needs of individuals. Sometimes, I didn’t always like that I was working for a government official. It was political. Some of the things I was asked to do were for political motives. The needs of the public were not always top priority.

Victoria Curtis is a student in the Master of Urban Affairs programme at Hunter College. She focuses on public policy and she expects to graduate in the summer of 2015.
THE INCOMPATIBILITY OF NEOLIBERALISM WITH PUBLIC WORKS: AN ANALYSIS OF THE ARC PROJECT

INTRODUCTION

Access to the Region’s Core (ARC) was a commuter rail project that was designed to improve connectivity between New York and New Jersey. The project’s completion would have modernized New York-New Jersey transit infrastructure by building a new tunnel under the Hudson River. The project began in 2009, but was canceled in 2010 by New Jersey’s Governor Chris Christie, who used the possibility of ‘cost overruns’ and the state’s lack of capital to abandon the ARC project. In April 2012, the United States Government Accountability Office (GAO), a non-partisan ‘watchdog’ group appointed by United States Congress, reviewed the project and determined that Governor Christie exaggerated the cost overruns and misstated New Jersey’s share of the cost. Although Governor Christie maintains his position that the cancellation of the project was politically motivated, Governor Christie’s political motivation stems from his unwillingness to break a campaign promise to not raise the state’s gasoline tax, which could have been used as funding for the ARC project. While breaking campaign promises may be attributed as the primary reason for the project’s cancellation, Christie’s ultimate decision to abandon ARC has broader implications. By abandoning the project, Christie perpetuates the notion that intervention is impractical, harmful, and symbolic of a bloated and fiscally irresponsible ‘big government.’ The abandonment of large public works projects like ARC is indicative of transition to egalitarian liberalism to the current Neoliberal period (1973- ). The perceived failures of egalitarian liberalism cultivated an extreme reaction that ushered in the Neoliberal era. Neoliberalism calls for massive deregulation, privatization, and transference of power from the federal to local level, and the constant pursuit of capital. Neoliberalism transforms planners into ineflectual in promoting equity. Under the Neoliberal construct, the planner advocates a form of ‘nonplanning,’ where his/her needs of industry to provide social benefits to people, while Neoliberalism is not. Consequently, the ARC project was a retreat of Late Modernist infrastructure projects, and its rejection is emblematic of its incompatibility with the current political and economic climate.

In this paper I will explore this dynamic further by analyzing the failed ARC project as it relates to urban planning theory, the nascence of Neoliberalism, and the decline of egalitarian liberalism of the Late Modernist era. I will structure my paper by first addressing the historical shift from Late Modernism to Neoliberal thinking. In this section I will describe the nature of Late Modernism marked by public works projects and government intervention that promoted class equity, and then the era’s decline, and the subsequent rise of Neoliberal thinking. I will then place the ARC project within the neoliberal construct by describing the nature of the project, purpose, the benefits, and its failure. I will then shift my focus to the role of the planner and assess the implications of the ARC project failure. Specifically, I will address the role of the planner within the neoliberal construct where the planner is a bureaucratic agent of capitalism. I will conclude that strict neoliberal policy can sometimes inhibit economic growth by limiting the basis for government intervention. This is evidenced from what ARC would have delivered to the Metro New York region: temporary and permanent jobs, and a more attractive New York metropolitan area favorable to long term business investment.

The Transition from Late Modernism to the Neoliberal era

At the height of the Late Modernist Era, marked by President Lyndon B. Johnson’s War on Poverty, government spending on social welfare programs reached 20 percent of the GDP (1960-1970). However, government’s involvement in social welfare began to precipitously decline due to an economic crisis that gripped the United States. There were numerous reasons for this economic downturn: the heavy cost of the Vietnam War, OPEC’s 1973 Oil Embargo, as well as the deindustrialization of the labor force which transformed the nation into a service-oriented economy. This transformation contributed to inflation and a general slow-down of economic growth, and the subsequent rejection of egalitarian liberalism.

The perceived failures of egalitarian liberalism cultivated an extreme reaction that ushered in the Neoliberal era. Neoliberalism calls for massive deregulation, privatization, and transference of power from the federal to local level, and the constant pursuit of capital. It is also an era that emphasizes competitiveness and the advantages of what Anthropology Professor Julian Brash refers to as a ‘space economy,’ which is characterized by the free flow of service, capital and goods. As such, Neoliberalism is characterized by the ‘heightened spatial mobility of capital’ which allows for large scale investment irrespective of place or region.

The Neoliberal Fragmentation of Planning

The spatial mobility of capital has the unintended consequence of fragmenting urban planning in a way that makes the planner ineffectual in promoting equity. Under the Neoliberal construct, the planner advocates a form of ‘nonplanning,’ where his/her goals are subject to limiting negative components of individual projects, without placing the projects into any broader planning framework. The Neoliberal construct obscures social problems in the pursuit of capital. Neoliberalism transforms planners into...
neither challenge the unions, Doherty said. ‘They like the unions,’ he said. ‘If you had a private company come in, some of these union guys would be out of luck.’

Consequently, while Christie’s reluctance to raise the gasoline tax represented a primary motivation to cancel the ARC project, the project’s ideological incompatibility with his Neoliberal values may be certainly viewed as part of the reason, as well. Indeed, after canceling the project outright, Christie argued that the project’s construction was questioned or planned projects that could have salvaged the project. One of these initiatives called for using a private company to invest in the ARC to relieve New Jersey of its financial burden, thereby privatizing an inter-state tunnel.

BROADER IMPLICATIONS OF THE ARC PROJECT SHUTTING DOWN

One of the more fascinating aspects of the ARC case was that in shutting down the project Governor Christie championed Neoliberal values, but also inadvertently opposed them. If Neoliberal thinking dictates the pursuit of capital, it can be seen as a restraint on the real estate market and promoting a more equitable society. Indeed, planning theorist Thomas Campanella argues that we need to support New Deal style infrastructure projects and is a supporter of Vishaan Chakrabarti’s American Smart Infrastructure Act (ASIA), which calls for building and re-building U.S. infrastructure. The plan’s goal is to reduce U.S. dependence on foreign oil while promoting sustainability and urban density. However, the failure of the ARC, a comparable public works project, which failed in the name of the gas tax and the Neoliberal ethos, demonstrates how this approach is not translatable over to larger mobility and economic gains. In the United States would have to reclaim its faith in the government and the overall planning process rather than anything else. Making and the overall planning process rather than anything else.

To reaffirm the planner’s power and agency, theorists have argued that it is necessary to return to the Late Modernist period where planners could think ‘big’ while simultaneously acting as a restraint on the real estate market and promoting a more equitable society. Indeed, planning theorist Thomas Campanella argues that we need to support New Deal style infrastructure projects and is a supporter of Vishaan Chakrabarti’s American Smart Infrastructure Act (ASIA), which calls for building and re-building U.S. infrastructure. The plan’s goal is to reduce U.S. dependence on foreign oil while promoting sustainability and urban density. However, the failure of the ARC, a comparable public works project, which failed in the name of the gas tax and the Neoliberal ethos, demonstrates how this approach is not translatable over to larger mobility and economic gains. In the United States would have to reclaim its faith in the government and the overall planning process rather than anything else. Making and the overall planning process rather than anything else.

To reaffirm the planner’s power and agency, theorists have argued that it is necessary to return to the Late Modernist period where planners could think ‘big’ while simultaneously acting as a restraint on the real estate market and promoting a more equitable society. Indeed, planning theorist Thomas Campanella argues that we need to support New Deal style infrastructure projects and is a supporter of Vishaan Chakrabarti’s American Smart Infrastructure Act (ASIA), which calls for building and re-building U.S. infrastructure. The plan’s goal is to reduce U.S. dependence on foreign oil while promoting sustainability and urban density. However, the failure of the ARC, a comparable public works project, which failed in the name of the gas tax and the Neoliberal ethos, demonstrates how this approach is not translatable over to larger mobility and economic gains. In the United States would have to reclaim its faith in the government and the overall planning process rather than anything else. Making and the overall planning process rather than anything else.

To reaffirm the planner’s power and agency, theorists have argued that it is necessary to return to the Late Modernist period where planners could think ‘big’ while simultaneously acting as a restraint on the real estate market and promoting a more equitable society. Indeed, planning theorist Thomas Campanella argues that we need to support New Deal style infrastructure projects and is a supporter of Vishaan Chakrabarti’s American Smart Infrastructure Act (ASIA), which calls for building and re-building U.S. infrastructure. The plan’s goal is to reduce U.S. dependence on foreign oil while promoting sustainability and urban density. However, the failure of the ARC, a comparable public works project, which failed in the name of the gas tax and the Neoliberal ethos, demonstrates how this approach is not translatable over to larger mobility and economic gains. In the United States would have to reclaim its faith in the government and the overall planning process rather than anything else. Making and the overall planning process rather than anything else.

To reaffirm the planner’s power and agency, theorists have argued that it is necessary to return to the Late Modernist period where planners could think ‘big’ while simultaneously acting as a restraint on the real estate market and promoting a more equitable society. Indeed, planning theorist Thomas Campanella argues that we need to support New Deal style infrastructure projects and is a supporter of Vishaan Chakrabarti’s American Smart Infrastructure Act (ASIA), which calls for building and re-building U.S. infrastructure. The plan’s goal is to reduce U.S. dependence on foreign oil while promoting sustainability and urban density. However, the failure of the ARC, a comparable public works project, which failed in the name of the gas tax and the Neoliberal ethos, demonstrates how this approach is not translatable over to larger mobility and economic gains. In the United States would have to reclaim its faith in the government and the overall planning process rather than anything else. Making and the overall planning process rather than anything else.

To reaffirm the planner’s power and agency, theorists have argued that it is necessary to return to the Late Modernist period where planners could think ‘big’ while simultaneously acting as a restraint on the real estate market and promoting a more equitable society. Indeed, planning theorist Thomas Campanella argues that we need to support New Deal style infrastructure projects and is a supporter of Vishaan Chakrabarti’s American Smart Infrastructure Act (ASIA), which calls for building and re-building U.S. infrastructure. The plan’s goal is to reduce U.S. dependence on foreign oil while promoting sustainability and urban density. However, the failure of the ARC, a comparable public works project, which failed in the name of the gas tax and the Neoliberal ethos, demonstrates how this approach is not translatable over to larger mobility and economic gains. In the United States would have to reclaim its faith in the government and the overall planning process rather than anything else. Making and the overall planning process rather than anything else.

To reaffirm the planner’s power and agency, theorists have argued that it is necessary to return to the Late Modernist period where planners could think ‘big’ while simultaneously acting as a restraint on the real estate market and promoting a more equitable society. Indeed, planning theorist Thomas Campanella argues that we need to support New Deal style infrastructure projects and is a supporter of Vishaan Chakrabarti’s American Smart Infrastructure Act (ASIA), which calls for building and re-building U.S. infrastructure. The plan’s goal is to reduce U.S. dependence on foreign oil while promoting sustainability and urban density. However, the failure of the ARC, a comparable public works project, which failed in the name of the gas tax and the Neoliberal ethos, demonstrates how this approach is not translatable over to larger mobility and economic gains. In the United States would have to reclaim its faith in the government and the overall planning process rather than anything else. Making and the overall planning process rather than anything else.

To reaffirm the planner’s power and agency, theorists have argued that it is necessary to return to the Late Modernist period where planners could think ‘big’ while simultaneously acting as a restraint on the real estate market and promoting a more equitable society. Indeed, planning theorist Thomas Campanella argues that we need to support New Deal style infrastructure projects and is a supporter of Vishaan Chakrabarti’s American Smart Infrastructure Act (ASIA), which calls for building and re-building U.S. infrastructure. The plan’s goal is to reduce U.S. dependence on foreign oil while promoting sustainability and urban density. However, the failure of the ARC, a comparable public works project, which failed in the name of the gas tax and the Neoliberal ethos, demonstrates how this approach is not translatable over to larger mobility and economic gains. In the United States would have to reclaim its faith in the government and the overall planning process rather than anything else. Making and the overall planning process rather than anything else.

To reaffirm the planner’s power and agency, theorists have argued that it is necessary to return to the Late Modernist period where planners could think ‘big’ while simultaneously acting as a restraint on the real estate market and promoting a more equitable society. Indeed, planning theorist Thomas Campanella argues that we need to support New Deal style infrastructure projects and is a supporter of Vishaan Chakrabarti’s American Smart Infrastructure Act (ASIA), which calls for building and re-building U.S. infrastructure. The plan’s goal is to reduce U.S. dependence on foreign oil while promoting sustainability and urban density. However, the failure of the ARC, a comparable public works project, which failed in the name of the gas tax and the Neoliberal ethos, demonstrates how this approach is not translatable over to larger mobility and economic gains. In the United States would have to reclaim its faith in the government and the overall planning process rather than anything else. Making and the overall planning process rather than anything else.

To reaffirm the planner’s power and agency, theorists have argued that it is necessary to return to the Late Modernist period where planners could think ‘big’ while simultaneously acting as a restraint on the real estate market and promoting a more equitable society. Indeed, planning theorist Thomas Campanella argues that we need to support New Deal style infrastructure projects and is a supporter of Vishaan Chakrabarti’s American Smart Infrastructure Act (ASIA), which calls for building and re-building U.S. infrastructure. The plan’s goal is to reduce U.S. dependence on foreign oil while promoting sustainability and urban density. However, the failure of the ARC, a comparable public works project, which failed in the name of the gas tax and the Neoliberal ethos, demonstrates how this approach is not translatable over to larger mobility and economic gains. In the United States would have to reclaim its faith in the government and the overall planning process rather than anything else. Making and the overall planning process rather than anything else.
I have been interested in all things Sci-Fi since I first saw Star Wars when I was seven or eight years old, and I always wonder if I will ever live to see cities like this in the future. Flying cars, cities that span an entire planet, worlds with underground bases, and a floating city in the clouds are just some things that caught my imagination. Odds are, though, that Star Wars technology is a far, far ways away. For now, I can only reasonably hope to see the Earth from outside her grasp—perhaps by taking a weekend getaway up to an off-planet orbital hotel.

Most long term or future planning classes we take have to do with our towns and cities here on Earth. If you have been in class with me you have probably heard me fling a couple of long Hail Mary passes of what I envision the future to be like or what I would like to accomplish. Many have actually laughed at the ideas. Most of us, including professionals in planning, think short- to medium-term. Where should we place a park? Where will the wastewater treatment plant go? Where do we put the bike lanes? I, on the other hand, think well past this week, next month, or next year but decades and centuries down the line. All towns and cities need people to think both long-term and short-term. We need a safe and secure environment to live, work, and play in. Except while many may think about getting bike lanes in Manhattan, I’m more excited by the thought of getting bike lanes on Mars.

While NASA keeps doing rover missions to Mars, entrepreneurs like Sir Richard Branson, Robert Bigelow, Elon Musk, and others are planning and fully executing plans to build rockers to jettison tourists into space. While this is only the beginning, many projects are being designed, developed, and tested to see when they can actually be implemented. Theoretically these ideas—like orbital hotels and cities (think 2001: A Space Odyssey)—could have been built in the 1970s. NASA did a study in 1975 for a Space City where they designed something called the Stanford Torus and the Bernal Sphere (think of the ring-worlds from the Halo video game series—except only a mile in diameter). The technology existed then, and it has only gotten better since.

I like to believe that I could one day start planning for small-scale developments in space or on the Moon. I like the idea of starting fresh, out in a world unknown to us. Earth right now has too many problems to count, and urban planning can only go so far to fix them. As the climate changes and the sea level rises and a global capitalist class dominates city development programs, our cities will look and feel much different from how they do today. The public, whom we work for, are subjected to the worst humanity has to offer. Up there, however, you would be starting anew, a real life utopia, a sandbox scenario like SimCity. Perhaps that’s the Sir Thomas More and John Locke in me with Sir Ebenezer Howard and Walt Disney injected ideas, but I truly believe a century from now the Earth will be no better off than it is today. Countries going to war, droughts leading to water shortages, incredibly powerful storm systems hitting our cities… Out there where the stars are just a little closer to reach out and grab, I believe more good can be accomplished right off the bat.

Whether I am working on Earth, the Moon or Mars, or somewhere else in a galaxy far, far away, I want to believe that what I am planning for will make someone’s life a little easier than before. If all my town or city can muster is fixing a pothole on Main Street, and the people driving over it don’t have to destroy their car’s suspension in the process then I’m a happy planner. While my job might not cover my utopian dreams right away, I hope one day I can achieve some of the big ones. For now I’m a couple of months away from the nearest checkpoint in my life, a Master of Urban Planning. To put it best, Eleanor Roosevelt said, “The future belongs to those who believe in the beauty of their dreams,” and since all I do is dream, the future must be beautiful.

Jake Rubinsky is a spring 2014 graduate of the Master of Urban Planning program at Hunter College. His focus is on transportation, but he has an interest in anything connected to the future of the planet.
NEOLIBERALISM AND THE POOR: EXAMPLES FROM COLOMBIA AND VENEZUELA

JACOB BOGITSH

INTRODUCTION

Poverty and inequality remain a major concern for Latin America. In spite of major economic expansions across the region, geographic disparities in living standards between the urban and rural poor still prevent vulnerable populations from sharing in the benefits of fiscal growth. The region continues to display the highest levels of poverty and inequality in the world, and like most of Latin America, much of poverty in Colombia and Venezuela is tied directly into the world market.1 Incomes are dependent on the whims and fluctuations of nation’s policies, and as a country experiences surpluses and deficits, it increasingly penetrates into both the urban and rural poor’s welfare. The 1980s were a particularly difficult decade for the poor of Latin America. Commonly known as the “lost decade,” it was an era of unprecedented economic adjustment and restructuring, cuts to social programs, and political turmoil, all of which coerced the neoliberal model to varying degrees in virtually every country in the region.2

The resulting reforms taken by Colombia and Venezuela to stabilize their economies during this “lost decade” had drastically different effects on the socio-political dynamic between each country’s government and its people. Both countries paths were shaped by neoliberalism, the economic ideology of deregulation and expansion of the market economy, promoting policies that favor the needs of business and investment.3 Colombia implemented such policies under the auspices of monetary aid from the United States and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to both fight illegal drug cartels and improve the country’s economic landscape. These measures worked, as Colombia was able to reduce its violence, increase tourism, and raise Gross Domestic Product (GDP) throughout the first decade of the twenty first century. However, like many developing nations, Colombia’s Gini index—a measure of inequality in the distribution of family income in a country from 0 (perfect equality) to 1 (perfect inequality)—decreased from 59.1 in 1980 to 53.6 in 1989 and then started worsening for the first time in many years.16 In 1991, Colombia passed a new constitution replacing its 1886 charter aimed at bringing major drug lords to justice and securing political peace.4 Though largely a political maneuver, the new constitution had important economic reforms designed into it as well. Part of the new constitution was President César Gaviria’s National Plan of Development (1990-1994) which aimed for a smaller role for the state, in hopes of stimulating the economy.5 A set of policies—including trade liberalization, labor and financial sector reform, and independence of the Bank of the Republic—were implemented toward increasing trade and competition and increasing national productivity. In less than one year, Colombia had reversed its historically gradual approach to economic development in favor of a neoliberal approach that had been based on a theory that had not been examined nor evaluated in practice.6

These policies worked well until 1995. However, by 1996 various factors had made the programs costly and inefficient, and were not matched by higher taxes or other government revenue, further adding to the public debt. The increased debt made the Colombian economy vulnerable to negative international shocks, and by the late 1990s, due to the effects of the Asian and Russian economic crises, Colombia experienced its first recession in more than sixty years.7 As a result, per capita income dropped and poverty rose as the gap between the affluent and poor increased substantially.8 Colombia’s Gini index—a measure of inequality in the distribution of family income in a country from 0 (perfect equality) to 1 (perfect inequality)—decreased from 59.1 in 1980 to 53.6 in 1989 and then started to rise again to a peak of 60.7 in 2001.9 Despite the increase in public spending social investment programs only received about 1 percent of GDP during this period, and poverty rates began to worsen for the first time in many years.10

The economic crisis of 1999 caused a loss of about 10 years of improvements in social investment, and ironically, due to high unemployment, many children and young adults joined the drug trade, increasing homicides and crime.11 This did not only happen in Colombia, but throughout Latin America. The impact of embracing a free market society had strenuous effects on the economic interests of big business, impressively increasing national GDP, particularly oil revenues, but further restricted the possibility of upward mobility between classes. In a country where upward mobility was already strained, the lack of properly implemented social investment programs during a major economic restructuring only further complicated the urban and rural poor’s livelihoods.12

The response by the government and the Central Bank to the crisis was to let the exchange rate float according to the foreign exchange market—meaning its worth was determined by the means of supply and demand relative to other currencies.13 However, in order to prevent the country’s currency from weakening so much that it couldn’t pay back its debts, Colombia signed a three year extended-fund facility agreement with the International Monetary Fund (IMF), concentrating on reducing inflation and reestablishing Colombia’s reputation as a fiscally stable economy.14

By 2000, Colombia’s fiscal goals had worked and the economy began to recover. President Álvaro Uribe (2002-2010), continuing to deal with the IMF and World Bank, enacted additional economic reforms designed to reduce the public-sector deficit, privatize public companies, secure loans, cut expenses, and construct investor confidence.21 Furthermore, Uribe maintained exceptionally tight ties with the United States to combat drug cartels and improve trade—methods which were originally proposed by President Andrés Pastrana Arango as part of Plan Colombia in the 1990s—providing monetary and military aid in exchange for policies that adhered to Washington’s neoliberalism.22 Uribe has been largely praised by international financial institutions for his efforts to strengthen the economy, as well as for providing some social expenditure in health, education, family, youth, and employment programs, and efforts to return displaced persons back to their homes.23 These reforms were considered positive, as in 2011, the World Bank estimated that 34% of Colombians were living below the poverty line, decreasing from 45% in 2005, and decreasing unemployment to 9.2%, the lowest in over a decade. Additionally, GDP growth in 2003 was among the highest in Latin America at over 4%, and by 2007, GDP grew over 8%.25

However, his opponents critique that in order to halt, albeit temporarily, its economic hemorrhaging, Colombia was forced to implement neoliberal austerity measures that effectively ensured that the borrower will be forced to return for more monetary aid in the future. Such measures also place the borrowing

The Debt Crisis and World Markets: Colombia from the 1980s until Today

When the debt crisis of the 1980s began, due to its conservative policies in the 1970s, Colombia did not have debt nearly as large as almost every other country in Latin America. There were still manageable ratios between its debt and interest, and its exports. However, by 1983 the country financed government deficits and very high fixed investments from foreign borrowing, leading to the “lost decade” of the 1980s. The resulting reforms taken by Colombia and Venezuela to stabilize their economies during this “lost decade” had drastically different effects on the socio-political dynamic between each country’s government and its people. Both countries paths were shaped by neoliberalism, the economic ideology of deregulation and expansion of the market economy, promoting policies that favor the needs of business and investment.3 Colombia implemented such policies under the auspices of monetary aid from the United States and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to both fight illegal drug cartels and improve the country’s economic landscape. These measures worked, as Colombia was able to reduce its violence, increase tourism, and raise GDP throughout the first decade of the twenty first century. However, like many developing nations, Colombia’s Gini index—a measure of inequality in the distribution of family income in a country from 0 (perfect equality) to 1 (perfect inequality)—decreased from 59.1 in 1980 to 53.6 in 1989 and then started to rise again to a peak of 60.7 in 2001. Despite the increase in public spending social investment programs only received about 1 percent of GDP during this period, and poverty rates began to worsen for the first time in many years.10

The economic crisis of 1999 caused a loss of about 10 years of improvements in social investment, and ironically, due to high unemployment, many children and young adults joined the drug trade, increasing homicides and crime.11 This did not only happen in Colombia, but throughout Latin America. The impact of embracing a free market society had strenuous effects on the economic interests of big business, impressively increasing national GDP, particularly oil revenues, but further restricted the possibility of upward mobility between classes. In a country where upward mobility was already strained, the lack of properly implemented social investment programs during a major economic restructuring only further complicated the urban and rural poor’s livelihoods.12

The response by the government and the Central Bank to the crisis was to let the exchange rate float according to the foreign exchange market—meaning its worth was determined by the means of supply and demand relative to other currencies.13 However, in order to prevent the country’s currency from weakening so much that it couldn’t pay back its debts, Colombia signed a three year extended-fund facility agreement with the International Monetary Fund (IMF), concentrating on reducing inflation and reestablishing Colombia’s reputation as a fiscally stable economy.14

By 2000, Colombia’s fiscal goals had worked and the economy began to recover. President Álvaro Uribe (2002-2010), continuing to deal with the IMF and World Bank, enacted additional economic reforms designed to reduce the public-sector deficit, privatize public companies, secure loans, cut expenses, and construct investor confidence.21 Furthermore, Uribe maintained exceptionally tight ties with the United States to combat drug cartels and improve trade—methods which were originally proposed by President Andrés Pastrana Arango as part of Plan Colombia in the 1990s—providing monetary and military aid in exchange for policies that adhered to Washington’s neoliberalism.22 Uribe has been largely praised by international financial institutions for his efforts to strengthen the economy, as well as for providing some social expenditure in health, education, family, youth, and employment programs, and efforts to return displaced persons back to their homes.23 These reforms were considered positive, as in 2011, the World Bank estimated that 34% of Colombians were living below the poverty line, decreasing from 45% in 2005, and decreasing unemployment to 9.2%, the lowest in over a decade. Additionally, GDP growth in 2003 was among the highest in Latin America at over 4%, and by 2007, GDP grew over 8%.25

However, his opponents critique that in order to halt, albeit temporarily, its economic hemorrhaging, Colombia was forced to implement neoliberal austerity measures that effectively ensured that the borrower will be forced to return for more monetary aid in the future. Such measures also place the borrowing
country's economic wellbeing in the hands of self-serving multinational corporations. Colombian development has been redefined as commercially unviable, as many rural communities see their development as threatening to their way of life. Millions of people are displaced from their land by drug violence, on which corporations depend. The rise in drug markets and the expansion of coca cultivation led to increased production for crop production. Additionally, jungle is cleared for cattle rearing, and mines are dug to extract natural commodities. It is possible to reduce income poverty, raise measures of health and education, while simultaneously disempowering the poorest members of society and promoting wealth and power in the richest. The application of neoliberal policies tends to benefit foreign investors over small business owners and workers, inadequately addressing the root causes of poverty and unemployment. Scarcely do free market economics trickle down to the entire population, and even less so to the most vulnerable, as indicated by a Gini index of 8.5 in 2018, placing Colombia alongside Brazil and Bolivia as the most unequal Latin American countries in terms of wealth distribution.

The Politics and Economics of Venezuela from the 1970s through the Turn of the Century

In contrast to Colombia, Venezuela’s economy was supported for decades by increasing oil prices and one of the world’s largest petroleum deposits. This glimpse of prosperity ceased in 1979, when Venezuela, as global economic trends and domestic challenges offset the gains set forth by previous years. The country failed to develop alternative economic means to sustain itself when the oil frenzy collapsed. Besides petroleum exports, which are controlled by quotas, the country has a minimal traded goods sector of manufacturing and agriculture. During the 1980s and 1990s, the country continued to grow and borrow, accumulating huge current account deficits in order to fund mostly wasteful investment projects.

By 1980, due to the prosperous development of the oil industry, and food self-sufficiency, and uses of producer and consumer subsidies to emerge from the crisis. The concerted efforts resulted in a modest revival of the economy (GDP grew by 16.7% in the years of 1986-88), but they also resulted in a rise in the inflation rate, the current account, and the government deficit. However, the high rate of subsidies and increasing foreign debt proved too much for the economy to maintain, particularly as the price of oil continued to drop nearly 50% during 1986.3

In 1989 Carlos Andrés Pérez took office for the second time, putting in place a new policy based on a reduction in aggregate demand together with structural changes. The main objective was a sharp fiscal contraction, reducing the government’s role in the economy and adhering to a neoliberal ideology. Previous policies of price control, restrictions on imports, and the system of multiple exchange rates were reversed. Additionally, tariffs were lowered to encourage trade and growth, and a process of privatizing state companies was instilled.

The socioeconomic tension occurring throughout the late 1980s caused popular discontent and violence to increase. After the new neoliberal policies were enacted, one of which removed gasoline subsidies which previously kept the price of its oil well below international levels, a spike of gas prices and public transportation costs resulted, intensifying the public. People began to protest against riots and mass arrests occurring in Caracas—where the government had to forcefully suppress the outrage. The conflict heightened political instability and ultimately led to a coup d’etat orchestrated by retired General Carlos Andrés Pérez, which was organized by military leader and future President Hugo Chávez Frías.

Following the Caracazo riots, Chávez was imprisoned along with his comrades. President Pérez soon resigned, and Rafael Caldera assumed power. Caldera shortly freed Chávez from prison and made political accommodations and criticized Caldera’s neoliberal policies and the ruling class. Using this increasing political momentum, Chávez was elected as President of Venezuela in November 1998.

With the election of Chávez, a leader gained power who adamantly opposed neoliberalism at home and abroad, dismantling the previous ideology and hegemony of the political elite. In his first orders of business was to put together a Constituent Assembly to “refund” the Republic. Chávez decreed a referendum and asked Venezuelans to accept the new Constituent Assembly, which would write a new constitution with a view of a new social republic.

Chávez’s new order was considered very controversial. Poverty clear-cut. Estimates indicate a reduction of 50 percent in 1998 to 43 percent in 2005, and yet further to 27.6 percent in 2008. Venezuela’s Gini index dropped from 0.5 in 1998 to 0.39 in 2011, putting the country behind only Canada in the Western Hemisphere. Social investment was made a pillar of his tenure—dubbed the Bolivarian Revolution after South American independence leader Simon Bolivar—his policies have benefited the poor as well as the three million Colombian immigrants who have fled across the border. The standard of living rose for the most marginalized due to government-funded social programs including subsidized food stores in many of the barrios, community medicine programs, low-income housing projects and micro-credit for small businesses.

However, under certain circumstances, these decreases in poverty are only dispersed to some of the poor, and more dangerously, as a result of the Chávez government’s radical and total commitment to a single currency to be depreciated more than once and stripping grocery stores of basic food staples like bread and milk. Additionally, violence and homicides almost doubled, making Venezuela one of the world’s most violent countries. The violence rate experienced by President Nicolás Maduro, continually undermined the country’s ability to increase foreign aid by both the United States and the IMF, instilling neoliberal economic policies. Whether or not these decisions benefited the country as a whole depends on who you ask. For some, the urban security achieved in reducing violence due to drug cartels created a safer environment and promoted investment and tourism, which is of course important. GDP increased, and continues to do so, creating promising new wealth for the nation. However, inequality still remains high, and many of the rural poor were displaced from violence and eventual plantation development. These communities, particularly indigenous, found their social and political rights slowly become extinct, or migrated to towns and cities, where employment is more available; and although their incomes increase with better access to basic healthcare and education, their cost of living is higher, and they are in truth poorer. Colombias displaced population, like the rest of the nation’s impoverished citizens, is waiting for the day when Chávez will cause a rise in minimum wage or trickle down. However, rarely does wealth trickle down to the neediest in developing nations, as most Latin Americans have been waiting in vain for more than 20 years for such effects to occur.

Conversely, when Venezuela tried to implement a similar neoliberal agenda, the growing inequality severely affected the poor, particularly the rural poor, and led to massive opposition. The emerging thought was to approach development from the bottom up, incorporating social policies to empower the poor, and framing the socialist government of Hugo Chávez to emerge. Chávez has done much to challenge the neoliberal model of development, constantly criticizing Washington and London’s economic policies. He has redefined the purpose of the North American empire in Latin America. While poverty has certainly declined, gaining valuable support from impoverished populations, inflation has soared, causing Venezuela’s currency to be depreciated more than once and stripping grocery stores of basic food staples like bread and milk. Additionally, violence and homicides almost doubled, making Venezuela one of the world’s most violent countries. The violence rate experienced by President Nicolás Maduro, continually undermined the country’s ability to increase foreign aid by both the United States and the IMF. Inflation soared, causing Venezuela’s currency to be deprecitated more than once and stripping grocery stores of basic food staples like bread and milk. Additionally, violence and homicides almost doubled, making Venezuela one of the world’s most violent countries. The violence rate experienced by President Nicolás Maduro, continually undermined the country’s ability to increase foreign aid by both the United States and the IMF.
Members of Brazil’s Landless Workers’ Movement blockade the highway outside Colinas, Tocantins.

Before that afternoon, I had had only minimal experience with Brazil’s Landless Workers’ Movement (MST). Leaving their campsamentos (roadside camps), men, women, and sometimes entire families would travel to the nearest city to sell chickens or cassava for supplies. For some of these landless farmers in Brazil’s northeast, that meant Colinas—a small city in the state of Tocantins of about 30,000 people that had sprouted seemingly ex nihilo around a gas station by the highway. I first met MST members through Leila, a tenacious lawyer committed to pro bono social justice work (and practicing English with chewy idioms) who I lived with for several weeks. Through strategic occupations of unproductive land, these rural workers were locked in battle against the country’s malfunctioning system of land appropriation. They spoke excitedly with me about land they had occupied and wealthy farmers with forged deeds. They told me that MST had almost 900 occupations housing 150,000 landless families. They said that they were fighting the country’s entrenched bureaucracy through radical actions and insurgent democracy. I had actually seen one of these demonstrations out on the federal highway somewhere south of Colinas. It can be startling and quite frightening to suddenly come upon a ribbon of flames stretched across the road. A wall of tires and tree branches an aflame by a nearby encampamento had brought signs, some of them armed, demanded that their “thirst for justice” be quenched. I had heard explanations and testimonies back in Colinas, but it was only out there at the beira do asfalto that the substance of MST became apparent.

We continued to drive in silence, Leila behind the wheel, her lawyer in arms, Silvano, sitting shogun, and me in the backseat. Only the whining of the Go’s power steering could be heard as Leila deftly navigated the cavernous potholes endemic to Northern Brazil’s roadways. An eighteen-wheeler barreled towards us in a serpentine path past holes and debris, kicking small rocks against our car as it confidently changed lanes at the last second to avoid collision. Every several miles, the monotony of the cerrado—the smattering of gnarled shrubs, closed canopy forests, and distant plateaus that compose Tocantins’ defining biome—was interrupted with swaths of smoldering vegetation (due to people incinerating debris or being careless, roadside fires are common in the cities as well as the cerrado). The heavy smell, which I had come to find oddly pleasant, infiltrated the car and made Leila wince. On any other afternoon, she would have said something; commented on the dry season, the dangers of six months without rain, or truckers tossing cigarette butts out their windows. But on that particular day she stayed quiet and I grew increasingly anxious.

We had driven this road before (minus Silvano) on a previous mission to a small town called Santa Fé. Our goal then was to plead with the Registrar of Births and Deaths to fix the birth certificate of a woman named Elizete. Still disoriented from childbirth, Elizete’s mother was handed a form she could not read. “I need to know first to ‘sex,’” she had marked male rather than female. In Brazil, where the Kafkaesque bureaucracy is pervasive to the point of banality, such a typo can prohibit someone from finding work, applying for loans, or receiving public services. Thus for Elizete, and others in her position, survival depends on extralegal methods, which often lead to housing and employment situations that are inconsistent, exploitative, and dangerous. Standing in the Registrar’s office in Santa Fé, Elizete demanded her birth certificate be changed to reflect her gender. The answer was “no.” Apparently their computers were down.

In other words, there is nothing accidental about the legal quagmire in Brazil. Centuries of strategic obfuscation have created a legal climate hostile to all but the wealthiest Brazilians. With so many forged land titles circulating among both elite farmers and also landless workers, determining authenticity has become largely a matter of personal preference. Municipal courts, whose decisions generally fall outside the scope of federal oversight, are effectively free to resolve land disputes based on anything from ethical convictions to bribes. In this environment, land scams continue to proliferate. Some schemes are centuries old, like the grileiro who exploits antiquated loopholes to lock interested buyers into an obligation of payment on land without conveying title. The expression is used to capture a uniquely Brazilian sense of resourcefulness of using a hair straightener to iron your shirt collar to the manipulative cunning of the grileiro. It is difficult to understand Northeastern Brazil without the jeitinho brasileiro that prevailed in my eyes: putting a tarp in the back of a truck and filling it with water to make a swimming pool or fitting an entire family onto an electric scooter to visit friends on the other side of town. However, during my time in Brazil it became clear that most often Brazilians use the expression in the negative sense of scheming and cheating, an effect perhaps of the widespread inequality and corruption visible at nearly all levels of daily life in the Northeast.

As far back as Brazil’s colonial period, land and its resources have been in constant dispute; a fact exacerbated by centuries of contradictory legal reforms and sanctioned law breaking. Passing from colonial power, to constitutional monarchy, to a republic, the Brazilian state demonstrated an inability to consolidate administrative power, instead deferring to local elites who used the country’s entangled legalities as a system of rule. Through the complex layering of legal procedure and regulation, land tenure grew to be so confusing that the only people who could administer it were those already in power. As James Holston writes: “Their strategy was not to deny the law—as often assumed in assertions that Brazil was and is a lawless land—but rather to create an excess of it.”

“Where in God’s name are we going?” Silvano turned and winked at me with a dark grin. Looking into the rearview mirror, Leila said: “A beira do asfalto.” In English, this means “the edge of the asphalt.” In the Amazon Basin, it means insurrection.

“Where they’ve burned down the farmer’s meeting hall,” said Silvano, suddenly breaking the silence. “The pisoderismo are getting braver.”

In English, this means “the edge of the asphalt.” In Brazil, where the Kafkaesque bureaucracy is pervasive to the point of banality, such a typo can prohibit someone from finding work, applying for loans, or receiving public services. Thus for Elizete, and others in her position, survival depends on extralegal methods, which often lead to housing and employment situations that are inconsistent, exploitative, and dangerous. Standing in the Registrar’s office in Santa Fé, Elizete demanded her birth certificate be changed to reflect her gender. The answer was “no.” Apparently their computers were down.

In other words, there is nothing accidental about the legal quagmire in Brazil. Centuries of strategic obfuscation have created a legal climate hostile to all but the wealthiest Brazilians. With so many forged land titles circulating among both elite farmers and also landless workers, determining authenticity has become largely a matter of personal preference. Municipal courts, whose decisions generally fall outside the scope of federal oversight, are effectively free to resolve land disputes based on anything from ethical convictions to bribes. In this environment, land scams continue to proliferate. Some schemes are centuries old, like the grileiro who exploits antiquated loopholes to lock interested buyers into an obligation of payment on land without conveying title. The expression is used to capture a uniquely Brazilian sense of resourcefulness of using a hair straightener to iron your shirt collar to the manipulative cunning of the grileiro. It is difficult to understand Northeastern Brazil without the jeitinho brasileiro that prevailed in my eyes: putting a tarp in the back of a truck and filling it with water to make a swimming pool or fitting an entire family onto an electric scooter to visit friends on the other side of town. However, during my time in Brazil it became clear that most often Brazilians use the expression in the negative sense of scheming and cheating, an effect perhaps of the widespread inequality and corruption visible at nearly all levels of daily life in the Northeast.

As far back as Brazil’s colonial period, land and its resources have been in constant dispute; a fact exacerbated by centuries of contradictory legal reforms and sanctioned law breaking. Passing from colonial power, to constitutional monarchy, to a republic, the Brazilian state demonstrated an inability to consolidate administrative power, instead deferring to local elites who used the country’s entangled legalities as a system of rule. Through the complex layering of legal procedure and regulation, land tenure grew to be so confusing that the only people who could administer it were those already in power. As James Holston writes: “Their strategy was not to deny the law—as often assumed in assertions that Brazil was and is a lawless land—but rather to create an excess of it.”

“Where in God’s name are we going?” Silvano turned and winked at me with a dark grin. Looking into the rearview mirror, Leila said: “A beira do asfalto.” In English, this means “the edge of the asphalt.” In the Amazon Basin, it means insurrection.

“Where they’ve burned down the farmer’s meeting hall,” said Silvano, suddenly breaking the silence. “The pisoderismo are getting braver.”

In English, this means “the edge of the asphalt.” In Brazil, where the Kafkaesque bureaucracy is pervasive to the point of banality, such a typo can prohibit someone from finding work, applying for loans, or receiving public services. Thus for Elizete, and others in her position, survival depends on extralegal methods, which often lead to housing and employment situations that are inconsistent, exploitative, and dangerous. Standing in the Registrar’s office in Santa Fé, Elizete demanded her birth certificate be changed to reflect her gender. The answer was “no.” Apparently their computers were down.

In other words, there is nothing accidental about the legal quagmire in Brazil. Centuries of strategic obfuscation have created a legal climate hostile to all but the wealthiest Brazilians. With so many forged land titles circulating among both elite farmers and also landless workers, determining authenticity has become largely a matter of personal preference. Municipal courts, whose decisions generally fall outside the scope of federal oversight, are effectively free to resolve land disputes based on anything from ethical convictions to bribes. In this environment, land scams continue to proliferate. Some schemes are centuries old, like the grileiro who exploits antiquated loopholes to lock interested buyers into an obligation of payment on land without conveying title. The expression is used to capture a uniquely Brazilian sense of resourcefulness of using a hair straightener to iron your shirt collar to the manipulative cunning of the grileiro. It is difficult to understand Northeastern Brazil without the jeitinho brasileiro that prevailed in my eyes: putting a tarp in the back of a truck and filling it with water to make a swimming pool or fitting an entire family onto an electric scooter to visit friends on the other side of town. However, during my time in Brazil it became clear that most often Brazilians use the expression in the negative sense of scheming and cheating, an effect perhaps of the widespread inequality and corruption visible at nearly all levels of daily life in the Northeast.
“Anyone hurt?” asked Leila.

“No, but the threats have been more frequent.”

While the roots of Brazil’s contemporary socio-geographic struggles are centuries old, the legal climate in which these conflicts are negotiated derives largely from Brazil’s 1898 constitution. Pressured by Brazil’s Workers’ Party (PT), along with the nascent MST, and recognizing the social implications of land, Brazil’s new constitution explicitly provided for state expropriation of unproductive land to squatters who could demonstrate a capacity to use it productively. By occupying unproductive land and establishing informal campamentos that then cultivated the land groups of squatters were legally eligible to become state recognized asentamentos (settlements) entitled to government services and amenities. The official body that was created to manage this process was the antiquated sounding National Institute of Colonization and Agrarian Reform (INCRA). However, as a vehicle for regularization of informal encampments, INCRA has proven to be not only corrupt, but sluggish and unwieldy as well, slowed to a dreadful crawl by the weight of an over-administered bureaucracy.

The axes of our Gol bucked over the dirt roadway, a scabrous moonscape pounded to dust by pickup trucks and heavy farming machinery. A prodigious villa looked on from its distant hilltop. “That’s the farmer’s house,” said Silvano pointing. “Let’s be quick.”

After about six minutes, we came to a clearing in the trees. In the center of the clearing surrounded by blackened palm branches were the remains of a modest circular structure. The central supporting beam sprouted from the center, jagged and black.

“Look!” Silvano knelt down to examine a patch of dirt. “They came on horses. Either there were a lot of horses or they were here for a while, probably watching the fire. The tracks circle around.” Something else caught his eye. He reached for the small bronze object and lifted it up, showing us a .22 caliber casing. “Ian, take the pictures so we can leave.”

The violence surrounding land occupations in Brazil is no secret. Of the several media-grabbing events from the past two decades, the massacre of Eldorado de Carajás in southern Pará may be the most tragic. On April 17, 1996, a crowd of landless farmers obstructed traffic on the interstate highway in order to draw attention to the unproductive land of a nearby ranch. That they hoped could be expropriated and used by a local MST encampamento. The police, recounting a survivor, “they got off and shot a round of .” “When the buses from Marabá arrived with the passengers on board,” one survivor said. “I was a k-turn and a heavy foot, we bounced violently towards the highway, away from the charred remains of solidarity.”

I had to take several photos from each position around the site because my shaking hands made for blurry shots. A branch snapped in the crumpled. We stopped and listened. Silence. I snapped more pictures: the hood prints, the bullet, the villa. “Let’s go, I think someone is coming,” said Leila from the road. We jumped back into the Gol. Silvano was driving now. With a whoosh, the car downshifted 4x4s coming from the villa. Leila crossed her arms and walked over to the fenced garden where a woman was returning; someone in Colinas was opening a bakery. I stood off and walked over to the fenced garden where a woman was enjoying a cigarette as she rested. Proudly she explained that she was helping farmers somewhere near Colinas. Well-known supporter of the MST, who was shot and killed by pistoleiros as she was helping farmers somewhere near Colinas. Well-known instances of land-related murder are rare, but in reality these crimes occur far more frequently than any politician would care to acknowledge. According to the CPT, 1,465 landless farmers and reform activists, including dozens of children, were killed in rural conflicts between 1985 and 2006. Such stark statistics tell a harrowing story, one that is unfortunately relegated to the informal channels of blogs and gossip.

By identifying unproductive land and organizing farmers, MST claims responsibility for some of largest mobilizations in Brazil’s history. However, the difficulties and dangers facing MST are profound. The true open shop of land being targeted by MST is often highly contested, with wealthy rural elites claiming private property rights based on illegitimate titles and deeds. Responsibility for resolving these disputes falls on the notoriously corrupt municipal courts. While INCRA may have the ultimate say in who owns land, the agency’s labyrinthine network of encampamentos, INCRA has proven to be not only corrupt, but sluggish and unwieldy as well, slowed to a dreadful crawl by the weight of an over-administered bureaucracy.

“Lay claim responsibility for some of largest mobilizations in Brazil’s history. However, the difficulties and dangers facing MST are profound. The true open shop of land being targeted by MST is often highly contested, with wealthy rural elites claiming private property rights based on illegitimate titles and deeds. Responsibility for resolving these disputes falls on the notoriously corrupt municipal courts. While INCRA may have the ultimate say in who owns land, the agency’s labyrinthine network of encampamentos, INCRA has proven to be not only corrupt, but sluggish and unwieldy as well, slowed to a dreadful crawl by the weight of an over-administered bureaucracy.”

Eventually the Skol coaxed us into lighter conversation: “Flamengo had four to Palmiras the night before; maracanã (a type of moth and harbinger of the wet season’s arrival) were returning; someone in Colinas was opening a bakery. I stood off and walked over to the fenced garden where a woman was enjoying a cigarette as she rested. Proudly she explained that she was helping farmers somewhere near Colinas. Well-known supporter of the MST, who was shot and killed by pistoleiros as she was helping farmers somewhere near Colinas. Well-known instances of land-related murder are rare, but in reality these crimes occur far more frequently than any politician would care to acknowledge. According to the CPT, 1,465 landless farmers and reform activists, including dozens of children, were killed in rural conflicts between 1985 and 2006. Such stark statistics tell a harrowing story, one that is unfortunately relegated to the informal channels of blogs and gossip.

Having worked with MST in the past, Silvano was put in touch with the people of São João. Since their resettlement, he had been coordinating with MST to expedite paperwork through INCRA and pass ownership of the land to the squatters. But things were not looking hopeful. Pistoleiros had started appearing outside the new campamentos, threatening to shoot the farmers and take their children. For months no one had heard from INCRA or the municipal courts. Yet morale was high. During the day, they worked to maintain life at the beira do asfalto. At night, there was music and fora dancing.

We jumped back into the Gol. Silvano was driving now. With a whoosh, the car downshifted 4x4s coming from the villa. Leila crossed her arms and walked over to the fenced garden where a woman was returning; someone in Colinas was opening a bakery. I stood off and walked over to the fenced garden where a woman was enjoying a cigarette as she rested. Proudly she explained that she was helping farmers somewhere near Colinas. Well-known supporter of the MST, who was shot and killed by pistoleiros as she was helping farmers somewhere near Colinas. Well-known instances of land-related murder are rare, but in reality these crimes occur far more frequently than any politician would care to acknowledge. According to the CPT, 1,465 landless farmers and reform activists, including dozens of children, were killed in rural conflicts between 1985 and 2006. Such stark statistics tell a harrowing story, one that is unfortunately relegated to the informal channels of blogs and gossip.

Eventually the Skol coaxed us into lighter conversation: “Flamengo had four to Palmiras the night before; maracanã (a type of moth and harbinger of the wet season’s arrival) were returning; someone in Colinas was opening a bakery. I stood off and walked over to the fenced garden where a woman was enjoying a cigarette as she rested. Proudly she explained that she was helping farmers somewhere near Colinas. Well-known supporter of the MST, who was shot and killed by pistoleiros as she was helping farmers somewhere near Colinas. Well-known instances of land-related murder are rare, but in reality these crimes occur far more frequently than any politician would care to acknowledge. According to the CPT, 1,465 landless farmers and reform activists, including dozens of children, were killed in rural conflicts between 1985 and 2006. Such stark statistics tell a harrowing story, one that is unfortunately relegated to the informal channels of blogs and gossip.

Eventually the Skol coaxed us into lighter conversation: “Flamengo had four to Palmiras the night before; maracanã (a type of moth and harbinger of the wet season’s arrival) were returning; someone in Colinas was opening a bakery. I stood off and walked over to the fenced garden where a woman was enjoying a cigarette as she rested. Proudly she explained that she was helping farmers somewhere near Colinas. Well-known supporter of the MST, who was shot and killed by pistoleiros as she was helping farmers somewhere near Colinas. Well-known instances of land-related murder are rare, but in reality these crimes occur far more frequently than any politician would care to acknowledge. According to the CPT, 1,465 landless farmers and reform activists, including dozens of children, were killed in rural conflicts between 1985 and 2006. Such stark statistics tell a harrowing story, one that is unfortunately relegated to the informal channels of blogs and gossip.

Eventually the Skol coaxed us into lighter conversation: “Flamengo had four to Palmiras the night before; maracanã (a type of moth and harbinger of the wet season’s arrival) were returning; someone in Colinas was opening a bakery. I stood off and walked over to the fenced garden where a woman was enjoying a cigarette as she rested. Proudly she explained that she was helping farmers somewhere near Colinas. Well-known supporter of the MST, who was shot and killed by pistoleiros as she was helping farmers somewhere near Colinas. Well-known instances of land-related murder are rare, but in reality these crimes occur far more frequently than any politician would care to acknowledge. According to the CPT, 1,465 landless farmers and reform activists, including dozens of children, were killed in rural conflicts between 1985 and 2006. Such stark statistics tell a harrowing story, one that is unfortunately relegated to the informal channels of blogs and gossip.
NYCHA AND THE 1937 HOUSING ACT

LEAH FEDER

Federal direct-construction public housing in the United States has a mixed legacy. Many of the large mid-century housing projects have been demolished, while affordable housing policy has shifted toward distributed programs based on tax-credits and mixed developments. While some critics argue that this evolution was the natural result of the low-cost, low-quality construction that inevitably results when government gets involved in housing construction, the history of public housing in the US tells a more nuanced story.

By exploring the origins of the federal direct construction housing program, we can see how two very different housing ambitions came to be vested in the program. These conflicting ambitions were subsequently negotiated in the different municipalities that set up Housing Authorities to seek funding under the 1937 Housing Act. While some, like Chicago, followed the welfare model logic that has come to dominate narratives about mid-century public housing, others resisted—most notably New York City, where the goal of social housing for the working poor was fought for, and, in some measures, achieved.

WAGNER–STEAGALL

Also known as the Wagner-Steagall Act, the 1937 Housing Act codified the establishment of a permanent public housing program in the United States. Considered a victory by many who had long fought for a non-market-based housing solution, it has been equally lambasted as one of the primary sources of the two-tiered housing policy that characterized housing policy in the latter half of the 20th century and persists to this day.

EARLY DEBATES

The Act arose in a national political climate steeped in debates about the role and nature of public housing. The federal government had already dabbled in public housing construction via the Temporary Public Works Administration (PWA) housing construction program, and the high costs and inefficiencies associated with that program plagued whatever was to come next. In a 1936 edition of Congressional Digest, Special Writer for The Washington Post Felix Bruner wrote, condemning PWA construction, "The Government has not produced a single unit of low cost housing. . . . The cost in every instance has been far above the range of the lowest income groups." This was representative of growing concern within congress over the high cost of PWA housing and the desire for a more cost-efficient housing program moving forward. In 1937, Executive Secretary of the Illinois Housing Commission Coleman Woodbury told a meeting of National Association of Housing Officials (NAHO) members, "It is unquestionable that the weaknesses of the past federal programs were largely responsible for the amendments made to the Bill on the Senate Floor."1

Moreover, insofar as a housing policy would be codified as permanent, it represented a direct threat to the residential real estate market. To the extent that each was immediately involved in residential real estate, the US Chamber of Commerce, the National Association of Real Estate Boards (NAREB), the US League of Building and Loans, and the National Retail Lumber Dealers Association all came together to oppose a permanent housing policy.2

The roots of one side of this divide can be traced back to the 19th century. During this time, reformers saw substandard housing as responsible for a multitude of ills, including "epidemics, crime, alcoholism, vice, hooliganism, and political revolution." The intellectual heirs of these reformers were the Progressives, who often saw reform as an act of removing a social ill. For them, building public housing necessarily went hand-in-hand with slum clearance, and it was as much the removal of the slums as the construction of something new that marked reform. For these reformers, public house meant housing for the very poor—those for whom the market could not provide housing.

A different view was concerned less with reforming existing housing than with creating an altogether new option. This more radical contingent, called the Labor Housing Committee (LHC), led by housing activist Catherine Bauer and influenced in large part by her seminal 1934 book Modern Housing, looked to the European social housing movement as a model for the United States. This model advocated high-quality, innovative architectural ideas along with the de-commercialization of residential property. Such a model would be based on federal subsidies to local government and nonprofit housing agencies, in service of modernist large-scale designs on the urban fringes that would house the working class while addressing overcrowding in cities and deflating the value of slum land. This housing would be for the working class, and it would present an alternative to market-based housing in the form of social housing.

Bauer was averse to "bailing out" or even rewarding slum owners.3 She and others were disinterested in the "little islands of good housing in a sea of slums" that slum clearance might produce,4 and had a healthy fear of slum clearance exacerbating low-income housing shortage.5 Notably, Bauer’s aversion to slum clearance and desire to build on vacant land was not about "racial or class integration," as she was not particularly concerned with racial or class integration, as she was not particularly concerned with either.5 That said, Bauer understood the power of slum clearance to influence representatives, and so was willing to frame the housing question in those terms.

RESULTING ACT

In the third year of attempts at a housing bill and over conservative and private interest objections, the Wagner-Steagall Act passed on September 1st, 1937, establishing a permanent federal responsibility for public housing in the United States. The Act created the United States Housing Authority (USHA) to oversee the federal housing program and channel funds via loans and subsidies to local housing authorities, which would be empowered to construct and oversee the housing. Given this structure, all major public housing decisions became local...
housing authority decisions: in particular where, if and how to build. The Act also mandated slum clearance, and included limitations regarding income levels of tenants and costs of construction.

**Reactions**

Upon the passage of Wagner-Steagall, the New York Times published: “America at last makes a real start toward wiping out its city slums.” That same article, however, acknowledged the “unwise amendments that were attached to [the Act] before its final passage.” Indeed, in some interpretations, “important elements of the proposed legislation had been compromised away.”

The objectionable amendments included a limit around nonprofit and cooperative housing and the removal of a provision for demonstration projects from Washington. Without demonstration projects, all building decisions were to be made by local housing authorities. While many progressives, including Bauer, supported the idea of local empowerment, they also bemoaned the “exclusive emphasis on local initiative,” which opened the door to locally powerful groups blocking any attempts to construct public housing in their communities. While local jurisdiction would prove problematic in contexts where public housing did not get built because local authorities simply did not want it, it would also contribute to certain successes, as we will see in the case of NYCHA.

Other amendments were seen as more damning to the modern housing vision of public housing. These included an amendment mandating elimination of slum property in a numbers equal to new units constructed, referred to as the “equivalent elimination clause”—undoubtedly a victory for the slum reform Progressives. Additionally, the Byrd amendment mandated construction costs be kept minimal; Gail Radford calls this “devastating.” Finally, the Act included general provisions that income and rental restrictions become prohibitive—most local authorities went above and beyond the limits. This, too, appeared as a triumph for the slum clearance progressives.

Together, these amendments could give the impression that the low-cost, low-income model of public housing built in places like Chicago and St. Louis represented the spirit of Wagner-Steagall. There is some disagreement, however, about whether such housing was made inevitable by the Act, or if it was the Act’s implementation that led to the ultimate “downfall” of public housing in those places it is deemed to have failed.

With respect to mandated equivalent elimination, the Act’s provisions were largely circumvented. A deferred construction loophole that Bauer had included in the law meant that mandated slum clearance did not need to happen immediately. As special assistant to USHA Director Nathan Straus, Bauer exploited this loophole tremendously. By 1946, USHA reported that 28 percent of prewar projects had deferred slum clearance: only 54,000 units had been eliminated, while 165,000 had been built. Where slum clearance prevailed, it was largely because many local housing authorities saw slum clearance as their primary mission.

D. Bradford Hunt argues that it was in the local enforcement of provisions that income and rental restrictions became prohibitive—most local authorities went above and beyond what was required by law. For instance, Elizabeth Wood, the Executive Director of the Chicago Housing Authority, sought the lowest income tenants possible, setting income limits significantly lower than was federally mandated. Contrastingly, the New York case illustrates a housing authority that pushed back against these same restrictions.

**NYCHA: Before and After**

Wagner-Steagall intersected with a New York City climate that had an increasing number of slums, high unemployment in the construction industry and a burgeoning public housing sector. Tenement legislation from the turn of the century had grandfathered in old-law tenements, and many reformers continued to see the slums as a public health hazard. Limited-dividend experiments “had blazed the trail toward public housing,” while the same forces pushing for federal legislation also advocated for a local housing authority. In 1934, a bill prepared under Mayor La Guardia passed in the State House, establishing a public housing authority in New York City, later to be known as NYCHA. Between 1934 and 1937, NYCHA constructed projects and undertook research and vital initiatives.

During this time, however, demand also increased: uncoordinated New Deal demolitions during the 1930s only heightened demand for housing. Meanwhile, the Multiple Dwelling Law (MDL) of 1936 further increased regulations for slum owners, causing more to close their doors. Slums sat vacant while families were doubled up in small tenements. This “artificially enhanced” demand—often stimulated by NYCHA itself—was part of a strategy to “heighten the sense of crisis” and gain public support for further public housing construction.

The first NYCHA project was called, aptly, First Houses: a city-funded project that established the marketability of Housing Authority bonds and NYCHA’s right of condemnation via NYCHA v. Muller. NYCHA also built two PWA projects, the Williamsburg Houses and the Harlem River Houses. All of these early projects suffered from high construction costs, which prevented them from serving as “model” projects. However, they also established important precedents around the intended residents of New York City’s public housing.

NYCHA established strict tenant selection practices in its early years. For First Houses, the Authority aimed to house working poor residents who were otherwise stuck in substandard housing, and so used a scale that factored in income, family, employment, present accommodations, previous residence, rent habits, and social background to select tenants. This system yielded “the cream of the poor,” including many families whose breadwinners were skilled laborers. In 1938, policy changed to ensure that those who were living in the worst conditions would be given preference in gaining space in the new tenements. This, however, did not necessarily mean preference for the poorest residents.

**Building for the Poor**

As explained earlier, Wagner-Steagall had specific stipulations about housing for the lowest income residents. The first US Housing Authority administrator, Nathan Straus, interpreted income limits strictly, and tried to force NYCHA to comply with his interpretation of the law. However, due to fears around the self-sustainability of housing and the creation of “perverse incentives” for residents, along with a desire for a “self-supporting” culture, NYCHA was highly resistant to such limits. While resistance to income limits was not necessarily due to an explicit ambition to build Bauer-style “modern housing,” this resistance nonetheless pushed New York’s public housing in that direction. NYCHA resisted federal income limit policies by stalling and pushing back against federal policy—
Undoubtedly, NYCHA was forced to make concessions to subsequent projects. NYCHA was therefore less encumbered by the limitations of federal legislation than were other authorities.

MULTIPLE FUNDING STREAMS

New York City was uniquely positioned to push back against USHA because it was not solely dependent on the federal government for its funding. In 1938, New York State established a state housing program; a city program was inaugurated shortly thereafter. These programs came with their own rules, including higher income limits, and their own funding streams—meaning that NYCHA was able to chart its own course in ways other cities could not, and making for a more diversified, resilient public housing program. NYCHA was therefore able to circumvent low-cost stipulation, including maintaining the appearance of thrift as a case for growing the housing program. It was PWA overspending and mismanagement that led to the costs factors in the law in the first place. NYCHA administrators identified the importance of illustrating public sector economy and efficiency if they wanted to continue their public housing program to continue to get political and financial support.

This was, moreover, trending nationwide. As the 1939 USHA Annual Report states, "Despite the doubts of many who felt that these . . . [construction-cost] limitations would seriously retard the housing drive, the average room costs . . . are well below the statutory maxima and are constantly being driven further downward." These units were then rented out at lower cost. These diversified streams would prove increasingly significant as USHA’s policies became increasingly restrictive and NYCHA had to use alternative funding streams to achieve its goals.

CHEAP CONSTRUCTION

On the question of cheap construction, there is little doubt that Wagner–Steagall had some influence. Red Hook Houses, the first development built under the Act, was built as low-cost, lower-quality housing, much like what would come to develop in the rest of the country. However, this is less a product of the Act than of the same forces that produced its low-cost stipulation, including maintaining the appearance of thrift as a case for growing the housing program. It was PWA overspending and mismanagement that led to the costs factors in the law in the first place. NYCHA administrators identified the importance of illustrating public sector economy and efficiency if they wanted to continue their public housing program to continue to get political and financial support.

This was, moreover, trending nationwide. As the 1939 USHA Annual Report states, "Despite the doubts of many who felt that these . . . [construction-cost] limitations would seriously retard the housing drive, the average room costs . . . are well below the statutory maxima and are constantly being driven further downward." These units were then rented out at lower cost. These diversified streams would prove increasingly significant as USHA’s policies became increasingly restrictive and NYCHA had to use alternative funding streams to achieve its goals.

SLUM CLEARANCE

Interestingly, Straus was a proponent of vacant land construction, as opposed to slum clearance. In this instance, there is some role-reversal regarding the spirit of the 1937 Act, with NYCHA Chairman Alfred Rheinstein pushing for high-cost slum clearance projects, while Straus advocated for decentralized housing, enforcing his preference by setting a maximum cost for land at $1.50 per foot. Both Straus’s and Rheinstein’s arguments were primarily economic: the former saw slum clearance as unnecessarily costly, while the latter disfavored vacant land construction because of what he predicted would be high infrastructural costs.

Rheinstein successfully pushed Vladeck Houses forward as New York’s first federally-sponsored slum clearance project at a land cost higher than Straus’s limit, and following Rheinstein’s departure from NYCHA in 1939. NYCHA got federal approval for slum clearance projects in South Jamaica, Bedford–Stuyvesant, and the Navy Yard. While this hardly presents forward the notion that NYCHA was building in line with Bauer’s “modern housing” vision, it does highlight that it was less the parameters of the 1937 law than the politics and adeptness of those in power subsequent to its passing that determined the course of public housing. New York’s local authority—the single biggest municipal Housing Authority in the country—was able to push back against the federal government in order to develop housing that met its vision and needs. When USHA would prove too restrictive, NYCHA had alternative funding streams to turn to in order to realize the public housing to which it aspired.

CONCLUSION

Ultimately, the decentralized nature of public housing production under Wagner–Steagall allowed for different expressions of housing production. In the case of NYCHA, we see a powerful local authority struggling for working-class housing against a federal housing authority that was increasingly moving toward the low-cost, low-quality housing projects for the very poor. Paradoxically, the same local control that gave the PHC concern regarding the Act was part of the saving grace of NYCHA.

That said, NYCHA was uniquely positioned at this time. It was the single biggest local housing authority and had the state and local support necessary for multiple funding streams—all of which allowed it to push back against and, at times, even ignore USHA. It is difficult to draw conclusions about what local control might have meant for other, less prominent, diversified, or resourced areas should their housing authorities have attempted to build as New York did.

Additionally, NYCHA’s resistance did not always fall in line with the “Modern Housing” vision of Bauer and the PHC. While NYCHA did seek to build for the working poor, it was also a housing authority in a dynamic state of becoming—wherein policy changed quickly from one Chairperson to the next, and even sometimes from one project to the next. While in some cases NYCHA built higher-quality construction for higher-income individuals, it also has the dubious distinction of introducing economizing innovations like floor-skipping elevators and doorless closets—features often used as a shorthand for the ill-advised construction decisions in US public housing. For this reason, it is difficult to characterize NYCHA’s housing as consistently representing any one particular ideology or framework.

In aggregate, however, NYCHA housing immediately before and after Wagner–Steagall catered to the working class despite national legislation and policy. NYCHA’s form and administration meant that it was not overly encumbered by the restrictions of Wagner–Steagall, and that meant building with a different population in mind than many other local authorities at the time.

This indicates that Wagner–Steagall itself did not, in all cases, represent a fate of low-cost housing for the very poor constructed in conjunction with widespread slum clearance. Choices made on the local level in New York City interacted with the provisions in the Act to lead to a unique instance and implementation of United States public housing—and these decisions would have significant impact move forward. In the coming years, as other city’s public housing came to crumble under the effects of high operating costs, poor management, and shoddy construction, NYC’s public housing would remain standing and operational.

Leah Feder is a student in the Master of Urban Planning program at Hunter College, where she focuses on the commons and community resilience. She expects to graduate in the spring of 2015.
I never understood how tough and dehumanizing life can be for some of these squatters until I took the bus early one day, around 6 A.M. As we traveled down the access road along side the Western Express Highway, I saw a dozen men lined up, squatting by a drainage ditch. They were spread out at various points along the ditch. I wondered what they were doing. Then I noticed the buckets.

I realized then that in a country of a billion people, in a city of 12 million, toilets are a major issue, perhaps the most important issue. And not just because of the indignity of defecating in public. Living without toilets can be dangerous. People actually die because of the lack of toilets. Small boys who venture into fields to use them as toilets are sometimes swept away by the strong and sudden monsoon runoff. Death is a sad reality of life for those without proper plumbing.

- Robert Neuwirth, Shadow Cities¹
From a western perspective, it is nearly impossible to imagine what life would be like without toilets. Yet, according to the World Health Organization, approximately 2.5 billion people (a third of the world’s population) do not have access to a safe sanitation system.1 In India, the problem is especially complex, in cities, where Peter Nunns explains that over half of the urban residents live in slum conditions.2 Actual living situations are highly diverse, ranging from stilt houses above the street to slums with thousands of residents.3 In India, the government often fails to install the necessary sewage treatment facilities. As a result, many residents end up flushing untreated sewage into the nearest creek, making the already poor sanitation situation even more dangerous. The resulting sewage from “improved” water systems can have detrimental effects on the environment and health.

TOILETS ARE A HEALTH ISSUE

Disease and death are the most serious and most obvious threats when it comes to lack of toilets in India. Open defecation and lack of proper drainage leads to polluted water supplies which breed bacteria and lead to the spread of diseases like cholera. Diarrhea is a major problem in slums, and can be life-threatening, especially among the young and the elderly. The World Health Organization estimates that globally, 2 million people die each year due to diarrheal diseases, and that most affected are those living in extreme conditions of poverty.4

In addition to health issues, women also face safety issues in the absence of toilets. Nunns explains that because most women in urban India work at home, they are more likely to be affected by the lack of water and sewerage.5 Singh and Kaish explain that the toilet block construction can be the first step in transforming seemingly powerless slum-dwellers into active agents for change. Consequently, women often go to secluded, far off places at early or late hours to defecate.6 It is during these times that they are at risk of violence and assault. Women’s rights advocates argue that most of the recent cases of rape of women and girls in India’s Bihar state occur when they go out to defecate.7 The constant threat of harassment and violence means women do not relieve themselves often, which can cause additional health problems like bladder infections and gastric issues.8

While it can be life threatening, open defecation is often the only option for many women. Even in places where there are government-provided toilets, women may avoid using them if they are intended to, and money to service and clean them is practically nonexistent.9 Public toilets are poorly maintained and have long queues. Furthermore, there are only 2.5 toilets per 1,000 women in India.10

In addition to health and safety issues, women are also facing removal from their homes, especially when it comes to lack of toilets. The government often fails to install households the necessary connection to the public toilet block construction can be the first step in transforming seemingly powerless slum-dwellers into active agents for change.

Tollets are a Political Issue

The issue of toilets is complicated, and it begins with politics. Many slums are illegally built on undeveloped land, often owned by private developers or the government. The Indian government is hesitant to expand sewer systems and other utilities to the slums because by doing so they are recognizing that these informal communities are legitimate.11 The government currently does not recognize most of the slums in India’s cities, and this lack of recognition is a great source of frustration and discrimination, harassment, and assault in their efforts to use public toilets. Consequently, women often go to secluded, far off places at early or late hours to defecate.12 It is during these times that they are at risk of violence and assault. Women’s rights advocates argue that most of the recent cases of rape of women and girls in India’s Bihar state occur when they go out to defecate.13 The constant threat of harassment and violence means women do not relieve themselves often, which can cause additional health problems like bladder infections and gastric issues.14

While it can be life threatening, open defecation is often the only option for many women. Even in places where there are government-provided toilets, women may avoid using them if they are intended to, and money to service and clean them is practically nonexistent.9 Public toilets are poorly maintained and have long queues. Furthermore, there are only 2.5 toilets per 1,000 women in India.10

In addition to health and safety issues, women are also facing removal from their homes, especially when it comes to lack of toilets. The government often fails to install households the necessary connection to the public toilet block construction can be the first step in transforming seemingly powerless slum-dwellers into active agents for change.

Tollets are a Women’s Issue

In addition to health issues, women also face safety issues in the absence of toilets. Nunns explains that because most women in urban India work at home, they are more likely to be affected by the lack of water and sewerage.5 Singh and Kaish explain that the toilet block construction can be the first step in transforming seemingly powerless slum-dwellers into active agents for change. Consequently, women often go to secluded, far off places at early or late hours to defecate.6 It is during these times that they are at risk of violence and assault. Women’s rights advocates argue that most of the recent cases of rape of women and girls in India’s Bihar state occur when they go out to defecate.7 The constant threat of harassment and violence means women do not relieve themselves often, which can cause additional health problems like bladder infections and gastric issues.8

While it can be life threatening, open defecation is often the only option for many women. Even in places where there are government-provided toilets, women may avoid using them if they are intended to, and money to service and clean them is practically nonexistent.9 Public toilets are poorly maintained and have long queues. Furthermore, there are only 2.5 toilets per 1,000 women in India.10

In addition to health and safety issues, women are also facing removal from their homes, especially when it comes to lack of toilets. The government often fails to install households the necessary connection to the public toilet block construction can be the first step in transforming seemingly powerless slum-dwellers into active agents for change.

Solving the Toilet Issue Requires Innovative Solutions

The World Health Organization states that “providing access to sanitation is a public health issue of the highest priority.”11 With the appropriate infrastructure in place, the ramifications of inadequate sanitation can be vastly reduced. In poor sanitation areas, women and children are at greater risk for diarrhea and malnutrition. In addition, sanitation issues can increase the risk for disease and other public health problems.12

In India, the lack of toilets has become an issue of politics, health, and women’s safety. While the Indian government and international organizations have come to recognize that the lack of toilets can be life threatening, NGOs, charitable trusts, and agencies from around the world have started to take notice and intervene. The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, for example, believes that “solving the sanitation challenge in the developing world will require radically new innovations that are deployable on a large scale.”13 To do this they are calling on the scientific community to come up with new ideas and sustainable solutions that can have a lasting impact. More importantly, they can serve as a catalyst for larger systemic changes. As Nunns puts it “if the politics of shit is a way for slum-dwellers to place some distance between their waste and the political hierarchy, then it is their right to claim the right to live in the city.”14 Community driven toilet block construction can be the first step in transforming seemingly powerless slum-dwellers into active agents for change.
New York City has long been revered as the financial capital of the world. However, particularly in the last few decades, turbulence in the financial services sector has demonstrated a need to safeguard New York City’s economy through diversification. Enter the tech industry—a fast growing sector that can diversify the city’s economy, protect against finance job decline and use existing assets: a young, well-educated workforce, available commercial space and investment capital. Tech is blooming in the city’s economy, protect against finance job decline and use existing assets: a young, well-educated workforce, available commercial space and investment capital. Tech is blooming in the city’s economy, protect against finance job decline and use existing assets: a young, well-educated workforce, available commercial space and investment capital.

Working with Coalition for Queens (C4Q), a non-profit working to bring the tech industry to Western Queens, the studio looked at zoning, transportation, economic development, working to bring the tech industry to Western Queens, the studio looked at zoning, transportation, economic development, working to bring the tech industry to Western Queens, the studio looked at zoning, transportation, economic development, working to bring the tech industry to Western Queens, the studio looked at zoning, transportation, economic development.

Our recommendations focus on addressing the above-referenced issues, in addition to incorporating the future population impact of Cornell University’s tech campus to be built on Roosevelt Island in the coming years:

- Create economic development incentives to provide shorter commercial lease terms, redevelop the existing industrial/manufacturing space, develop fiber-optics and wide-spread internet connections, and provide funding up-front for tech endeavors.
- Increase transportation connectivity between Queens, increase ferry stops between Manhattan, Roosevelt Island and Western Queens.
- Implement placemaking projects to encourage active engagement along commercial corridors.
- Continue to engage elected officials and promote coordination with community organizations.

The devastation wrought by Superstorm Sandy in October 2012 focused a great deal of attention on the Rockaway Peninsula in New York City. Pictures of debris-strewn streets, collapsed houses, and shattered boardwalks ran alongside human-interest stories of courage and fortitude in the face of disaster. These stories entered the national and regional consciousness forcefully but fleetingly, and without context. What is Rockaway like, and what issues have faced its residents before and since the storm? What has the storm and recovery revealed about local issues, politics, policies, and planning? What do residents and local organizations want and need? How do these issues differ across neighborhoods and racial and social groups?

The goal of our studio has not been to create a written plan, but to use media and film to create accessible documents that move beyond post-Sandy news coverage to explore the deep and lasting impacts of racial and social divisions and injustices that are endemic on the peninsula, and to highlight opportunities for residents to shape the future of the Rockaways.

We analyzed existing conditions and trends to identify assets, challenges, and opportunities to the development of a tech sector in Western Queens. Initial barriers include:

- Lack of office space that is affordable to tech companies on a startup budget, a need for additional commercial fiber internet connections.
- Addressing issues associated with an existing population that is vulnerable to displacement due to increasing housing costs.
- Looking at how to engage uninviting and unsafe streetscapes and under-utilized public spaces.

The Rockaways are known to many for its vibrant history as a winter resort, but to many Rockaway residents, the neighborhood has been impacted by a long history of racial, social, and economic exclusion. Rockaway Peninsula is a place where the past and present can often be found side by side. As residents work to rebuild after Hurricane Sandy, they continue to grapple with the challenges that have long shaped the peninsula.

Our work is focused on three aspects of the community:

- Arverne East and Community Benefits Agreements
- Public Housing
- Employment

Arverne East is the largest city-owned vacant lot in New York City. More than 10,000 Rockaway residents live in public housing operated by the New York City Housing Authority, which is concentrated on the eastern half of the peninsula. Like all of Rockaway, public housing was damaged by Sandy. Public housing was already in disrepair before the storm, however, and existing problems like water infiltration and mold and inconsistent heat and hot water were made even worse by the flooding and the housing authority’s inadequate response to repair needs. Residents are also struggling with unemployment, lack of social services and activities—particularly for youth, public safety concerns, and a poor police-community relationship. Community leaders including tenant association members and other resident organizers are working to address these issues at various scales, from resident members and staff of the Redfern community center working to secure capital funding for playground renovations through Participatory Budgeting, to tenant association leaders and other resident organizers working to bring together residents from across Rockaway developments to form a strong, broad base to advocate for long-term improvements. These efforts to organize residents are challenged by a sense of frustration and cynicism that is common among residents, as well as the everyday struggles of many residents to secure and maintain work. Activists also confront problems of poor communication with and lack of information from the housing authority. Seeking to build on the social unity among residents seen after Sandy, and to demand the attention of the new mayoral administration, resident leaders are coming together to strategize ways overcome these challenges and improve public housing conditions in Rockaway.
The primary focus of the Brownsville Public Housing studio is the New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) public housing contained within a study area bounded by East New York Avenue on the north, Junius Street on the east, Livonia Avenue on the south, and Rockaway Avenue on the west. Within the study area are ten superblocks serving as sites for NYCHA multi-family buildings and supporting community facilities and open spaces. These complex provide over 6,700 units of affordable housing. Public housing in Brownsville is a community asset as it provides affordable housing and community development. However, these developments have also become concentrated pockets of poverty with administrative neglect.

The Brownsville studio is concerned with barriers brought on by the structure and management of NYCHA as well as physical conditions and overall community livability.

The studio mission is therefore improving the public housing of Brownsville to create a more livable community. To this extent, we recommend providing better community services, reforming management of the public housing, and improving the physical environment. While our proposal focuses on the public housing, we believe that this will greatly benefit all Brownsville residents.

COMMUNITY AND RESIDENCE RECOMMENDATIONS

- Strengthen Collaboration between NYC Department of Youth and Community Development and Medgar College to fund Beacon and Community Learning programs for out-of-school and weekend programs.
- Create a pilot Young Adult Internship Program
- Promote cooperative planning between civic groups by establishing steering communities
- Expand funding of Center for Court Innovation to support Beacon and Cornerstone programs for out-of-school programs.
- Strengthen Collaboration between NYC Department of Youth and Community Development and Medgar College to fund Beacon and Community Learning programs for out-of-school and weekend programs.

NYCHA STRUCTURE AND ORGANIZATION

- Restructure and decentralize NYCHA structure
- Promote various rent structures
- Reduce contractual services by increasing residential employment
- Improve public perception of NYCHA through a City-wide Coalition of Public Housing Resident and a PR Campaign

PHYSICAL PLANNING

- Foster connectivity on NYCHA campuses by removing obstructions, improving walkability, and re-establishing street grid
- Improve subway connections by improving connection between 3 and L trains, improving walkability to Broadway Junction and making subways ADA accessible
- Rezone to encourage a continuous retail corridor and increase residential density
- Foster development on underutilized lots
New York City mayor Bill de Blasio started his new job with a bold, seemingly uncontroversial policy priority: end traffic fatalities. His proposed Vision Zero, which emphasizes pedestrian safety, seeks to prevent traffic accidents through new street designs and infrastructure, reduced speed limits, and stronger traffic enforcement. The plan has been widely embraced by urban planners and pedestrian and bicyclist advocates, but raised alarm among groups concerned with how the policing component will affect neighborhoods and people of color. What underlies this concern, and should planners be paying attention?

The policing of low-level offenses is at the center of debates about crime and social justice. Minor misdemeanors, like hopping a turnstile, panhandling, and drinking on a park bench, are often targeted by police departments as essential public safety and quality of life issues. Current New York Police Department Commissioner Bill Bratton and other proponents of this approach, commonly known as the “broken windows” theory of policing, argue that such enforcement reduces crime not only by deterring similar offenses but also by creating opportunities for police to identify people who might have committed more serious crimes. Critics point out that these practices disproportionately affect the poor and people of color, and argue that they do not reduce crime. Ramping up enforcement of traffic infractions like jaywalking or failure to signal, opponents argue, will only expand the scope of discriminatory and invasive “broken windows” practices.

Police reform activists cite the detrimental social impacts of aggressive criminalization and policing of minor infractions, including:

- Increased arrest and incarceration rates, which contribute to poverty and inequality. Rising incarceration rates in the U.S. have been linked to aggressive enforcement of nonviolent felony offenses, primarily drug crimes, as well as misdemeanors and even non-criminal behaviors like “furtive movements” through stop, question and frisk tactics. These police practices are typically targeted at black and Latino people, especially men, at rates that far exceed their representation in the population. Mass incarceration has been linked to a cycle of poverty, and to racial socioeconomic disparities. Many activists and community members aware of the detrimental impacts of the criminal justice system, through data or personal experience, thus argue against policing as a solution to social problems.

Fear and mistrust of police. Aggressive police practices lead to poor community-police relations. People become less likely to cooperate with police investigations; people also become skeptical of the intent and ability of police to protect them. In particular, uneven enforcement and surveillance across neighborhoods and demographic groups may increase perceptions of the city and police as discriminatory.

Changes in who uses neighborhood spaces, and how. New York City has a history of policing particular groups or activities seen as threatening to the quality of life or safety in public spaces, from the squeegee men of lower Manhattan to subway panhandlers. Advocacy groups like New Yorkers Against Bratton have pointed to connections between these policies and gentrification, looking also to recent examples like Los Angeles, where the police, guided by Bratton, targeted the homeless in the city’s rapidly developing downtown. While researchers have been unable to establish a clear link between policing and neighborhood change, the perception that law enforcement policy is shaped as part of a strategy to support real estate development and demographic changes runs deep in gentrifying communities.

While Vision Zero and any related police enforcement have not yet been implemented, social justice advocates are concerned by recent NYPD data that shows arrests for panhandling and other low-level offenses are up under Bratton, and by anecdotal reports of jaywalking crackdowns and police checkpoints in poor neighborhoods.

Planners, by and large, are not having these conversations about policing related to Vision Zero. The impact of incarceration and policing on racial, social, and economic inequality, however, should concern planners committed to social justice. And the fact that some people feel alienated or even threatened by Vision Zero should give pause to those attempting to build a broad, inclusive base for transportation planning and safety. What might these debates and policies look like if planners expanded the conversation? What will they look like if we do not?
CONTACT URBAN REVIEW:
hunterurbanreview@gmail.com
695 Park Avenue
West Building 1611
New York, NY 10065
P: 212-772-5518
F: 212-772-5593

To learn more about the graduate program in Urban Affairs & Planning at Hunter College visit our website at www.hunteruap.org

Back issues of the Urban Review can be found online at hunteruap.org/guapa