

Stop NYCHA Infill Plan, Save Public Housing

The plan to build market-rate buildings at public housing sites doesn't save NYCHA, it threatens it. There's a better way, this writer argues.



By [Tom Angotti](#) | Thursday, May 9, 2013

CITY LIMITS

It's time to stop NYCHA's plans to "Save Public Housing." The New York City Public Housing Authority (NYCHA) wants to build luxury condos on public housing sites, a step along the slippery slope leading to the destruction of public housing. There are better alternatives. The city and state can plug NYCHA's budget deficits, NYCHA residents can do the planning as equal partners with administrators and their neighborhoods and new legal protections can prevent the privatization of public housing.

When news recently leaked of NYCHA's [Infill Plan](#), which would lead to the construction of 4,330 units of housing in luxury towers on playgrounds and parking lots of existing Manhattan projects, the [outcry from NYCHA residents](#) and the public was loud and clear. This may well have put things on hold for a while, but the frenzied drive by the Bloomberg administration to seal its legacy in brick and mortar before the end of the year is unrelenting. Now is the time for all advocates of housing rights in the city to come together with public housing residents in a broad community response that links the preservation of public housing with demands to preserve and develop truly affordable housing throughout the city. It is a golden opportunity for NYCHA residents to reverse the years of top-down decision making by the authority's appointed directors. It is time that we all recognize NYCHA's projects for what they are – diverse communities with people who have basic human rights and the right to housing.

Common ground: tenants in public and private housing

Saving public housing should concern all New Yorkers, especially all New York renters. The 280,000 units of affordable housing under NYCHA, with some 600,000 residents, represent the largest remaining stock of housing affordable to working people and those in greatest need. Contrary to many myths, NYCHA projects are not segregated ghettos only for low-income people. They are already diverse, *mixed income* communities – the goal touted by housing reformers everywhere – and the Infill Plan would most likely destroy this pattern by isolating and displacing low-income residents. If NYCHA goes upscale, affordable units will be lost, and there will be greater pressure on tenants in nearby private housing, Mitchell-Lama and other affordable city-supported projects, who will face rising rents when there are fewer low-cost alternatives in the market. This will be especially true in the "hot" Manhattan neighborhoods where public housing is located, where sharp increases in land values are bound to jack up rents, force out affordable retail and services, and feed a spiraling process of gentrification and displacement. Not surprisingly, these are the very neighborhoods targeted by NYCHA's Infill Plan.

There is money for public housing

Where's the money going to come from, some may ask? The "Save Public Housing" and NYCHA Infill initiatives start from the assumption that there is no money to sustain the system due to federal, state and city cutbacks. This is not true. What is true is that the largest source of funding for repairs and maintenance—federal government outlays—is drying up and there is not enough pressure on Congress to increase funding.

But there is no reason the gap cannot be filled by city and state governments. They found the money to save the Metropolitan Transportation Authority and reduce fare increases because that was a political priority and in the public interest. NYCHA's annual operating deficit is around \$100 million—about one tenth of one percent of the city's annual budget. Over two-thirds of that operating deficit could be wiped out if the city stopped charging NYCHA for police protection, something it does not do for private complexes or other neighborhoods. Saving public housing must be seen as a priority when formulating the city's budget. A penny spent to save public housing will go much further than the millions in tax benefits given to luxury housing developers.

Mayor Bloomberg has been quite creative when it comes to use of the city's capital budget, bonding power, federal stimulus money, and tax expenditures to support development projects he considers his priority. NYCHA's shortfall in capital funds is around \$7 billion. The city put up about \$3 billion to build a one-mile extension of the #7 subway that would serve the exclusive

multi-billion dollar Hudson Yards development, otherwise known as "Dubai-on-the-Hudson."The administration had no problem generating capital funds for Atlantic Yards, Yankee Stadium and CitiField. Certainly securing decent housing for 600,000 tenants is worth a lot more than feeding the commercial ventures of wealthy investors.

The mayor and City Council members who claim there's no money for NYCHA are playing games. They are responsible for putting together and approving the city's \$70 billion annual budget! We should not accept "no"for an answer.

Require resident plans and land-use review

For too long NYCHA has planned for the layout and use of the spaces around its projects with little or no foresight or involvement of residents. Many planners long ago criticized NYCHA for failing to include affordable commercial retailers, fencing in open spaces, and discouraging residents from gardening. The top-down infill plan follows this tradition. It was cooked up by management without the serious involvement of residents or the surrounding communities, treating the land simply as real estate and not an integral part of the living environment for thousands of people. There's nothing inherently wrong with developing the land, but there is also nothing inherently right about it either. We should, however, question any move to take away open space at a time when it is needed more than ever. The tower-in-the-park model that dominated the design of many projects has been rightfully criticized by many planners, but taking away the park would make it even worse.

NYCHA and residents should collaborate as equals in the development of plans for the use and development of project land. Residents must have independent professional experts working for and with them so that they enter the collaboration on a level playing field. These plans should include updating and revising zoning, which for most projects has not changed since the housing was built. All plans and zoning changes must be subject to the city's land use review process, which includes review by the community board, borough president, city planning commission and city council.

NYCHA units must be legally protected

It is not enough for NYCHA to promise that no existing units will be lost due to its infill plan. We have the sad experience of the federal HOPE VI program, which HUD (the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development) promised would not result in a net loss of low-income units. Over 100,000 units were lost nationwide.

If NYCHA goes ahead with their plans to "save public housing," there would be no legally enforceable guarantee that no low-income units would be lost. There would be no penalties if some were. If NYCHA were to go ahead with its Infill plan, there would be no guarantee that in the future the remaining public housing units would not be subject to market rents.

Putting rich condo owners in towers next to public housing residents is a formula for conflicts that the richer and whiter condo owners are likely to win. Their arrival will bring the boutiques and gourmet food stores that will make local shopping unaffordable for many. When condo owners start complaining they don't like to hear the music or smell the barbecue coming from public housing, or they are fearful of crime and need extra police presence, the scene is set for political battles in which wealthier residents are likely to prevail. The unfortunate history of the federal urban renewal program and gentrification show us how communities of color have been pushed out by new luxury housing development. NYCHA's priority needs to be community development, not real estate development.

We can create Community Land Trusts (CLTs) to be the stewards of public housing land. A CLT is an organization holding title to the land that can lease buildings and land to other entities—like non-profit housing corporations, NYCHA or limited-equity cooperatives—for use only as specified in the trust. The members of the board of the CLT usually include tenants, community residents, housing rights advocates and city officials. NYCHA chair John Rhea is accountable only to the mayor who appointed him, and so will future commissioners be unless this undemocratic structure is changed. Creating CLTs throughout the city, or a single CLT for all public housing, would force a drastic change in NYCHA's inefficient, insensitive, top-down management structure, empower public housing residents and promote participation in their communities.

For too long the city's tenant movement has been divided. To fight for better rent regulations, we've had to go to Albany. To fight slumlords, we go to Housing Court. For better city housing programs, we target the city's housing agency, the Department of Housing Preservation and Development (HPD). And public housing residents have dealt with NYCHA. Now the combined power of all tenants is needed to increase renters' muscle when it comes time to fight for tenant rights—at NYCHA, City Hall, Housing Court and in Albany. It will be harder to win any of these battles in isolation. Facing bureaucrats, politicians and powerful banking and real estate interests, NYCHA residents need all the support they can get.