

**Towards Inclusive Living: An Interdisciplinary Approach to  
Community-Supported Ecosystems in Public Housing**

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# LIVABLE CITIES LONDON

AMPS Proceedings Series 39.1

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## Livable Cities - London A Critique of Issues Affecting Life in Cities

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# INTRODUCTION

## Livable Cities - London

### A Critique of Issues Affecting Life in Cities

Today, the societies, cultures, and the places in which we live and work are increasingly intricate phenomena. Globalization eradicates spatial boundaries to business. Gentrification involves social and political pressure. Pandemics are never site specific or confined to the past. Architecture and urban design are global endeavors. Sustainability requires material and political action. Patterns of criminality are not place bound. Similarly, the need for education and housing are universal and land rights are essential legal tools for First Nations and communities everywhere.

Within this mode of thinking, when we discuss sustainability we must consider local planning and global politics. When we speak about smart cities, we are obliged to consider cyber security and civil rights. When we discuss law and human rights, we cannot ignore economic or social policy. Equally, when we think about food production and consumption, we must consider transportation costs, public health, and more.

In reading livability as an aggregate of forces then, Volume One of the Livable Cities – London proceedings, do not see ‘the city’ as primarily a physical and designed entity. On the contrary, it posits ‘the livable city’ as a ‘construct’ involving a plethora of agendas, practices and disciplines. As an inherently interdisciplinary publication it explores cities as both a series of material questions and immaterial phenomena. It critiques the city as an interplay of forces that includes spatial design, but importantly focuses of politics, sociological trends, cultural tendencies and media representations, as much as it involves economic policy, planning strategy and the provision of public services.

By juxtaposing, comparing and sharing work in various fields then, it is expected that a broader and richer picture will emerge in these pages with respect to what makes the places we inhabit more, or less, livable.

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# TOWARDS INCLUSIVE LIVING: AN INTERDISCIPLINARY APPROACH TO COMMUNITY-SUPPORTED ECOSYSTEMS IN PUBLIC HOUSING

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## INTRODUCTION

In the contemporary Australian housing landscape, social housing is a crucial part of the social safety net but faces significant challenges and negative perceptions. It is essential for providing stable, long-term housing solutions for low-income individuals or those with complex needs, yet it is often viewed as exacerbating social and economic disadvantages.<sup>1</sup>

This paper introduces an interdisciplinary design project planned for the second half of 2024, aimed at addressing these challenges by creating community-supported ecosystems within public housing developments. The initiative involves academia, design professionals, tenants, and state government agencies to enhance social inclusion and foster a sense of belonging among residents. By employing participatory design methodologies, the project empowers tenants to co-create their living environments, incorporating their perspectives and preferences.

Through workshops, focus groups, and collaborative design sessions, tenants will share insights into their experiences and aspirations, enriching the design process and resulting in solutions that address both physical and social dimensions of public housing. The project aims to create cohesive and supportive living environments that prioritise residents' well-being and empowerment, challenging the negative perceptions of social housing in Australia.

This approach contrasts with prevailing negative views that stigmatise residents and contribute to feelings of shame. By fostering collaboration between academia and real-world challenges, the project serves as a model for building vibrant, resilient communities within public housing. The interdisciplinary approach highlights the importance of holistic and inclusive design principles in addressing complex social issues.<sup>2</sup>

Additionally, this paper illustrates the transformative potential of design-led efforts in catalysing positive social change, supported by state government agencies. This aligns with efforts like the National Housing and Homelessness Agreement, which aims to improve access to secure and affordable housing. The project will also provide a toolkit to support advocacy for funding initiatives to improve public housing tenants' experiences. This toolkit will be a valuable resource for stakeholders seeking financial support for projects that enhance the quality of life and social outcomes in public housing, contributing to ongoing community development and social welfare discourse.<sup>3</sup>

## The Brief History and Current Crisis of Social Housing in Australia

Social housing consists of two main types: public housing, which is owned and managed by State and Territory Governments, and community housing, which is managed and often owned by not-for-profit organisations. Public housing in Australia has a long history dating back to the early 20th century, with major developments occurring after World War II. The 1945 Commonwealth-State Housing Agreement established a framework for federal and state governments to jointly fund and manage public housing initiatives. This led to a boom in public housing construction during the 1950s and 1960s, creating large housing estates in urban areas.<sup>4</sup>

However, the landscape began to shift in the 1970s and 1980s as economic pressures and changing political ideologies led to reduced government investment in public housing. The focus moved towards encouraging private home ownership and market-based solutions to housing affordability.<sup>5</sup>

This trend has continued, resulting in a significant decline in social housing. In 1981, 4.9% of Australian households lived in social housing, but by 2021 this had dropped to just 3.8%. This puts Australia behind comparable countries like England, where 17% of households live in social housing.<sup>6</sup>

	Social housing dwellings	All Australian dwellings	% Social Housing
<u>1981</u>	228,938 dwellings	4,668,906 dwellings	4.9%
<u>2021</u>	351,017	9,275,217 households	3.8%

Figure 1. Sources: AHURI Final Report No. 231 and ABS.

Today, Australia faces a critical shortage of affordable housing. The 2021 Census recorded 348,018 social housing dwellings, while over 216,000 applicants were on waiting lists. In total, about 6.1% of households were either in or seeking social housing—a significant gap from the 3.8% currently.<sup>7</sup>

The composition of social housing has also shifted over time. As of June 2023, there were around 446,000 social housing dwellings in Australia:

- 67% (298,000) were public housing
- 26% (114,000) were community housing
- 3.1% (14,000) were state-owned and managed Indigenous housing
- 4.3% (19,000) were Indigenous community housing.<sup>8</sup>

While community housing stock has increased since 2006, public housing stock has declined. This reflects a move towards privatisation and community housing models. The shortage of affordable housing is exacerbated by rising living costs and stagnant wage growth. High inflation, rising interest rates, and increasing rents have put unprecedented pressure on low and middle-income households.<sup>9</sup>



Figure 2. Public Housing in Flemingington, Melbourne. Source: ABC

### The Growing Demand for Public Housing

The demand for public housing in Australia is growing significantly, with approximately 189,000 households on social housing waiting lists as of December 2023.<sup>10</sup> This represents a substantial increase from the 166,000 households reported in June 2020, with nearly 40% classified as being in 'greatest need'. These figures underscore the urgent need for affordable housing solutions, particularly for vulnerable populations such as those at risk of homelessness or fleeing domestic violence.<sup>11</sup>

Despite the increasing demand, the proportion of social housing in Australia has steadily declined over the past few decades, as illustrated by the data. This decline has occurred alongside a sharp increase in government spending on Commonwealth Rent Assistance (CRA), which rose from approximately \$3 billion in 2007-08 to over \$5.3 billion in 2020-2.<sup>12</sup> However, the increased spending on CRA has not adequately addressed the housing affordability crisis. The maximum weekly CRA payment remains capped at \$73, and inadequate indexing has failed to keep pace with rising rents.<sup>13</sup> Consequently, rental stress has become more prevalent, with nearly half (46 per cent) of households receiving CRA experiencing rental stress, defined as spending more than 30 per cent of household income on rent.<sup>14</sup>

Australia's focus on promoting home ownership while neglecting social housing expansion has created a "lose-lose" situation. The lack of a coherent national housing policy has contributed to this crisis, leaving many vulnerable Australians struggling to find stable, affordable accommodation. There is an urgent need for a comprehensive, long-term strategy to address Australia's housing crisis. This should include significant investment in new social housing stock, renovation of existing public housing, partnerships with community housing providers, incentives for private sector investment in affordable housing, and a national framework for inclusionary zoning.<sup>15</sup>

As Australia grapples with economic uncertainty, providing adequate social housing is more critical than ever. A paradigm shift in housing policy is needed—one that recognises housing as a fundamental right and prioritises creating diverse, affordable housing options for all Australians. This approach should address both the supply of affordable housing and the adequacy of rental assistance programs to ensure a more equitable and sustainable housing landscape for the future.

### Satisfaction levels of Public Housing

A 2023 National Social Housing Survey by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare indicates that just over 70 per cent of tenants were satisfied with emergency maintenance services but expressed dissatisfaction with improvements to the building and surroundings.<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, tenants highlighted several benefits of living in public housing, such as better economic management, a sense of

community, and an increased ability to cope with life's events. Despite these advantages, tenants stressed significant challenges associated with public housing. These include the stigmatisation resulting from the concentration of lower socio-economic groups in specific areas and a persistent lack of investment in renovations. The limited opportunities for improvement projects in and around the buildings often lead to a diminished sense of home and community pride among residents. This underinvestment not only affects the physical living conditions but also impacts the tenants' overall well-being and their ability to feel truly settled in their living spaces.<sup>17</sup>

The inadequate supply of social housing is further compounded by significant maintenance and repair costs. Over the past five years, nearly \$34 million has been spent repairing Queensland public housing due to vandalism, damage, and uncleanliness.<sup>18</sup> This highlights a broader issue within the public housing system - the substantial financial burden it places on taxpayers. Public housing is primarily funded through taxpayer dollars, and critics argue that these funds could be more effectively allocated to other programs. The costs associated with social housing support can be substantial, often reaching billions of dollars annually, making public housing a significant social expense.<sup>19</sup>

### **CO-DESIGN/DESIGN THINKING AS A PRIMARY METHODOLOGY**

Co-design or participatory design and design thinking methodologies have emerged as transformative approaches in addressing complex societal challenges, particularly in public and third sector projects like social housing. These human-centered approaches prioritise empathy, intuition, and inspiration over purely analytical or functional considerations.<sup>20</sup> They involve diverse stakeholders, fostering innovation through the synthesis of varied perspectives and positioning participants as active change-makers rather than passive recipients of solutions. The process typically follows a structure that includes exploration, creation, and prototyping phases.<sup>21</sup>

1. Exploration/Discovery Phase: This stage involves empathising with stakeholders, conducting research, and defining their needs and aspirations. For the public housing project, immersive workshops with public housing tenants will be conducted to understand their lived experiences, challenges, and aspirations. Participatory mapping exercises and storytelling techniques will capture rich, qualitative data about tenants' daily lives and interactions with their living environments.<sup>22</sup>

2. Creation/Ideation Phase: Participants will engage in brainstorming, ideation, envisioning, and narrating potential solutions. In the public housing context, collaborative design sessions will bring together tenants, housing professionals, and policymakers. Using design thinking tools such as persona creation and journey mapping, participants generated and refined ideas for improving social housing.

3. Prototyping and Testing Phase: This will involve building and testing tangible representations of the proposed solutions. For the public housing project, innovative ideas will be developed into tangible prototypes, ranging from physical models to manual and digital concepts. Tenants will be actively involved in testing and providing feedback on these prototypes, allowing for rapid feedback and refinement of ideas.

Throughout the process and in addition to in person workshops, digital collaboration platforms will facilitate ongoing communication and idea-sharing among participants. This iterative approach will allow for continuous refinement of concepts and ensured that tenants' voices remained central to the design process. By following this human-centered approach, co-design and design thinking methodologies aim to produce more innovative and effective solutions that resonate with the intended users and stakeholders, ultimately leading to improved public housing project outcomes.<sup>23</sup>

## LiveSpace

LiveSpace Studio for Socially and Environmentally Responsible Design is a vibrant, collaborative design studio based within the Design Department at Queensland College of Art, Griffith University, located in Brisbane’s South Bank precinct. LiveSpace projects provide students with opportunities to work on real-world projects within the broader community, challenging them beyond the limitations of a typical studio environment. By engaging in projects outside the classroom, students gain insight into the complexities of the entire design process and the crucial interactions between designers, clients, consultants, trades, community members, and stakeholders. This continuous feedback loop encourages students to design appropriate research methods, community consultation processes, and disciplined practices to achieve successful outcomes. Cross-disciplinary project teams, including students from Interior Environments, Product Design, and Visual Communication, collaborate closely, fostering skills beyond traditional industry expectations.<sup>24</sup>

LiveSpace, will play a pivotal role in the Spring Hill public housing co-design project during semester two 2024. Engaging with the tenants, Fortitude Valley Housing representatives, and other stakeholders, LiveSpace will facilitate a series of workshops, focus groups, and collaborative design sessions. These sessions will enable tenants to share their invaluable insights into their lived experiences and aspirations, thereby enriching the design process. The participatory approach will ensure that the resulting solutions address both the physical and social dimensions of public housing, aiming to create cohesive and supportive living environments. This collaboration will emphasise the importance of residents' well-being and empowerment, aligning with LiveSpace's commitment to socially and environmentally responsible design.

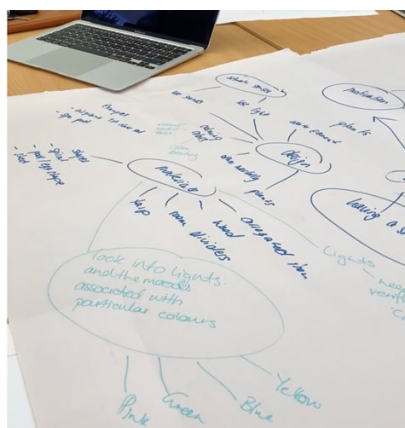


Figure 3. Planning Workshop, July 2024, LiveSpace

## THE PILOT STUDY PROJECT

The project site for this social housing initiative is a public housing unit complex comprising 12 units located in Spring Hill, an inner-city suburb of Brisbane—Figure 4. Spring Hill is home to approximately 7,000 residents and is situated within Australia's third-largest metropolitan area, which has a population of 2.6 million. The suburb features a mixed-use urban fabric, providing a transition between lower-density residential areas and higher-density developments closer to the city center.



Figure 4. Project Site, Spring Hill, Brisbane. Source: Author

The characteristics of the study's participants were largely similar to the tenant profile of the community housing provider, though there was a higher representation of females and older individuals in the study compared to the overall tenant population. These participant demographics align with typical Australian social housing tenants, where 62% are female, 55% are single adult households, and 73% are aged 45 years or older.<sup>25</sup>

The housing complex in Spring Hill, Brisbane, is managed by Fortitude Valley Housing, a housing service centre of the Queensland Government. Long-term tenants have experienced challenges including break-ins, vandalism, and drug-related issues involving a few tenants and neighbours. Despite these difficulties, the residents are eager to personalise and improve their living environment. To address these concerns and empower the tenants, a participatory design process will be implemented. This co-design approach will bring together the tenants, Fortitude Valley Housing representatives, LiveSpace, and an Urban Design Studio to collaboratively develop solutions. The design process will be structured into six key meetings, ensuring that all stakeholders have a voice in shaping the improvements and fostering a sense of ownership and community among the residents.

#### **1. Meeting 1: Define Goals and Objectives**

This initial session focused on establishing the project's aims and desired outcomes, ensuring all stakeholders had a shared understanding of the project's purpose.

#### **2. Meeting 2: Workshop - Brainstorming and Ideation**

Participants engaged in creative exercises to generate a wide range of ideas for improving the housing complex, addressing security concerns, and enhancing the overall living experience.

#### **3. Meetings 3 and 4: Workshops - Creating Tangible Representations**

These sessions involved transforming the ideas generated during the co-design process into concrete representations. This included developing both low-fidelity prototypes (such as sketches and paper models) and high-fidelity prototypes (like digital mock-ups and functional models).

#### **4. Meeting 5: Workshop - Feedback and Refinement**

In this session, participants reviewed and provided feedback on the prototypes developed in the previous meetings. This allowed for further refinement of the designs and ensured that they continued to align with the needs and preferences of the tenants.

#### **5. Meeting 6: Workshop - Implementation Planning**

The final workshop focused on developing a concrete plan for implementing the chosen designs. This included discussing timelines, resource allocation, and assigning responsibilities to ensure a smooth transition from design to reality.

Throughout the process, digital collaboration platforms will facilitate ongoing communication and idea-sharing among participants. This approach will allow for continuous refinement of concepts and ensured that tenants' voices remained central to the design process. The co-design methodology will ensure that the outcomes are not only theoretically sound but also practically applicable and responsive to the real needs of the community. This aligns with the growing recognition of co-design's potential to address systemic issues and improve life conditions for specific demographic groups.<sup>26</sup>

### **The Toolkit**

In addition to addressing design responses for the pilot project site, this project aims to provide a comprehensive design concepts toolkit. The toolkit is designed to suggest improvements for existing public housing buildings, focusing on enhancing living conditions through practical guidance on improving, but not limited to, communal spaces. It covers essential aspects such as setting goals, budgeting, and design considerations.

This toolkit will be instrumental in seeking funding from housing corporations to improve these spaces. It empowers tenants to actively participate in enhancing their living environments and serves as a platform for sharing innovative ideas that can transform communal areas and foster community engagement.

The guide begins by helping residents establish clear objectives for their living space improvements, ensuring that efforts align with personal needs and community standards. Budgeting tools are included to assist tenants in managing financial resources effectively, ensuring that improvements are both affordable and sustainable.

By offering a holistic approach to home improvement, the toolkit not only aims to improve livability in public housing buildings but also to inspire collaboration and strengthen community ties. It is a valuable resource for fostering sustainable and supportive housing communities, ultimately benefiting the broader public housing community by enhancing the quality of life for all residents.



*Figure 5. Early Ideation Sketch. Source: Author*

### **CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, this interdisciplinary project represents a significant step towards addressing the complex challenges facing Australia's social housing sector. By bringing together academia, design professionals, tenants, and state government agencies, this initiative offers a promising approach to encouraging community-supported ecosystems within public housing developments.

The project's focus on participatory design methodologies, particularly co-design and design thinking, marks a departure from traditional top-down approaches to public housing management. By empowering tenants to actively co-create their living environments, the project not only gives voice to their perspectives and preferences but also fosters a sense of ownership and community pride. This approach has the potential to address many of the issues highlighted in the National Social Housing Survey, including dissatisfaction with building improvements and the stigmatisation often associated with public housing.

The collaboration between LiveSpace Studio, the tenants, Fortitude Valley Housing, and other stakeholders demonstrates the power of interdisciplinary partnerships in tackling complex social issues. By leveraging the expertise of design students and professionals, housing professionals, and policymakers, the project creates a rich environment for innovation and problem-solving. The structured design process, with its six key meetings, ensures a comprehensive approach that covers everything from goal-setting to implementation planning.

Moreover, the project's emphasis on creating both physical and social solutions addresses the multifaceted nature of the challenges facing public housing in Australia. By considering not just the built environment but also the social dynamics within the housing complex, the project has the potential to create truly cohesive and supportive living environments.

The development of a comprehensive design toolkit to support advocacy efforts is particularly significant. This resource could prove invaluable in securing funding for future initiatives aimed at improving the lived experiences of public housing tenants. By providing stakeholders with best practices and advocacy tools, the project contributes to the broader effort of establishing inclusive and sustainable living environments within public housing contexts.

However, while this project represents a significant step towards reimagining public housing in Australia, it's important to acknowledge the broader context in which this project operates. The declining proportion of social housing in Australia, coupled with increasing demand and rising costs, presents significant challenges. While this project offers a promising model for improving existing public housing, it also highlights the need for a comprehensive, long-term strategy to address Australia's housing crisis at a national level.

As Australia grapples with its housing affordability crisis, initiatives like this one provide hope for a more equitable and sustainable housing landscape in the future. The success of this project could pave the way for a paradigm shift in housing policy, one that recognises housing as a fundamental right and prioritises creating diverse, affordable housing options for all Australians.

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# **DOWNTOWN DENVER AND THE PARADOXICALITY OF THE MID-TWENTIETH CENTURY AMERICAN VISION ON URBAN RENEWAL**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

The current Homelessness crisis in Downtown Denver reveals a type of societal short-sightedness which begs for a series of serious questions. While there were various causes which led to this pathology, among the most acute ones was the dramatic shift of the site following its early 1980s urban renewal. As part of a greater neoliberal vision on eradicating the blight from cities' centers—*The Skyline Urban Renewal Project* aimed at reimagining the Denver's Downtown area as lavish, high, rapid, but most importantly: Sleaze-Free!

In their 1999 pioneering volume, 'Braving the Street: The Anthropology of Homelessness', Irene Glasser and Rae Bridgman point out that the emergence of Homelessness as a national public concern in the United States occurred during the late 1970s and early 1980s.<sup>1</sup> The causal relation between the drastic transformation of the face and fabric of American cities and the intensification of homelessness in cities' centers, not only contextualizes this phenomenon within the societal realm, but also reveals that the other side of urban livability—as manifested within the mid-twentieth century's American vision on Urban Renewal—was the dying of the (other) city dwellers. This paper explores the relations between the 1980s *Skyline Urban Renewal Project*, and the current Homeless crisis in Downtown Denver as a symptom of a paradoxical American Dream on Livable City.

## **THE ENABLERS: FEDERAL ACTS AT THE AGENCY OF COLLECTIVE IMAGINATION**

For a large extent, the future nature of urban renewal in US cities was shaped between 1949 and 1956. Within a seven-year period, two substantial federal acts forever changed the social and urban fabric in America. The first was the *1949 Housing Act*; the second was the *Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1956*. The latter resulted from a simultaneous national aspiration on security and speed; the former came in response to the decline of cities' centers. Their interplay, however, provides a unique glimpse into the post-World War II American sentiment, which consisted of both megalomania and melancholy. In the context of Denver's Downtown, this paper asks: "What kind of urban public space was shaped by those national collective sentiments? And then, what is the relation between a public space that was shaped by these sentiments, and the return of the homeless to Denver's Downtown by the twenty-first century?"

## 1949 Housing Act

The first, and main, instigator for the intensity of urban renewal projects in the US during the second half of the twentieth century was the passing of the *1949 American Housing Act*. The act intended to address the decline of urban housing in cities' centers that followed postwar demographic changes, and the consequent mass migration towards the suburbs.<sup>2</sup> It was the first "direct federal involvement in physically shaping cities".<sup>3</sup> Subsequent to the social logic, as enacted via the *1939 New Deal*, the *1949 Housing Act* reflects a desire for political attention to urban conditions.<sup>4</sup> The legislation dealt specifically with these three areas: reduction of housing costs; establishing and improving housing standards and standardization; and the clearance and rebuilding of slums<sup>5</sup> and blighted areas.<sup>6</sup> This latter point deserves close attention. Aiming at combating social blight as part of housing legislation marked a paradigmatic shift, not only in the scale of federal intervention within urban policies, but also—and more importantly—because of its ideological nature.

The term "blight" is a legal term used for the purpose of determining whether a neighborhood or commercial area can qualify for urban renewal.<sup>7</sup> Describing the federal fiscal mechanism to foster clearance and rebuilding "Blighted areas", established under Title I of the *1949 Housing Act*, social historian Colin Gordon writes: *local redevelopment corporations could buy and clear blighted areas with federal money, sell the land to private developers, and use the proceeds to cover the redevelopment costs.*<sup>8</sup> While the Act's first title is prescriptive in regard to the newly proposed fiscal mechanism, the usage of the term "blight" to designate sites for clearance remains deliberately vague.<sup>9</sup> Inherently subjective—or even metaphorical (as it originated as a description of the biological condition of the decaying of plants)—the usage of the term "blight" for legal purposes, renders dubious the neutrality of its application. Delineating the legal roots of the term, Gordon writes: *The modern statutory definition of blight is rooted in our first urban crisis, the Progressive-era response to the urbanization and industrialization in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.*<sup>10</sup> More importantly, however, is the fact that from the outset, "blight" as a legal term was associated not only with crime and decay, but also with a social fear of homelessness. According to Gordon:

Cities, in the environmental determinism of urban reformers, had become "nurseries of crime, and of the vices and disorderly courses which lead to crime perpetrated by individuals who have either lost connection with home life, or never had any, or whose homes had ceased to be sufficiently separate, decent, and desirable to afford what are regarded as ordinary wholesome influences of home and family...".<sup>11</sup>

This origin link between blight and homelessness—given the function of the term in designating areas for urban clearance (and renewal)—casts a further light on the set of criteria and considerations that underlie the procedure of sites' selection. If part of the decision to demolish a site was affected by the fact that it was occupied by homeless people, what does it say about those who chose to exclude them? What system of belief is threatened by being home-less?

The scope of the federal urban renewal projects that were established under Title I of the *1949 Housing Act* during 1954 and 1974—those programs which per Fainstein: *became the principal weapon used by government to combat urban "blight"*<sup>12</sup>—suggest that the desire to eliminate the homeless is simply a symptom for the protection of the dogmatic—perhaps neurotic—practice of family. However, even though the act's first title marked blighted areas as "predominantly residential," neither cities nor developers were required to build affordable housing on their redeveloped districts.<sup>13</sup> This gap between the stated social goal and its actual implementation testifies to the intricacy of the overt and covert collective desires: first, the impulse to clear out the streets from the presence of the homeless demonstrates the pivotal role of the American taboo called: 'family', and then, the paradoxical absence of residential constructions within the renewal sites themselves, reveals that the American worship of

commerce is even more ecstatic than the one associated with family. Was that not precisely the void through which the homeless person would later be finding their way back?

### **Federal-Aid Highway Act Of 1956**

The second profound influencer of the late twentieth century American vision on urban renewal was *The National Interstate and Defense Highways Act of 1956*, aka the *Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1956*. This act established the biggest public project in the nation's history.<sup>14</sup> Seeds for this project were already planted during the 1930s, but it took over two decades to transform vision into legislation, and it was under President Dwight D. Eisenhower that the act was fully implemented. For a large extent, Eisenhower's vision on highways and their role in national defense was inspired by the German highway network.<sup>15</sup> Observing its function in defending Germany during World War II, Eisenhower was driven to build a matching roads system that would position America at the cutting edge of mobility and security. In this sense, the Interstate Highway project was a vision of modernity that is linked not only to speed, but also to military power.

An attempt to disguise the desire for gaining greater national power through the implementation of the Interstate Highway System can be seen in the shifting of the Act's title from *The National Interstate and Defense Highways Act* to *The Federal-Aid Highway Act*. The replacement of the word "Defense" by the word "Aid" alludes to the camouflaging of a national desire for a militant power by an innocuous communal sentiment. In fact, the construction of the Interstate Highway System drastically altered the community development in America during the late twentieth century. As part of this project, massive superhighways cut through neighborhoods, and countless households were displaced.<sup>16</sup> Most of the displaced households belonged to poorer and disadvantaged communities.<sup>17</sup> Discussing the impacts of the *Highway Act of 1956*, in her introduction to *Restructuring the City: The Political Economy of Urban Redevelopment*, Susan Fainstein writes:

The Highway Act of 1956, establishing the interstate expressway system, marked the beginning of large-scale federal intervention in urban road systems. ...Federal intervention greatly increased the tempo of road building and for the first time put priority on urban, as opposed to rural, highways. The federal intrusion, however, did nothing to reorient the preexisting focus on improving traffic flow to the detriment of other considerations such as community preservation...<sup>18</sup>

The current Downtown Denver area is a perfect example for the implications of the disconnect between the grandiose national modern vision on speed—linked to military power—linked to wealth—and the societal local demands for housing. Intrinsic to this disconnect is the site's regional setting. First, its geography, then its political pulls, created an urban phenomenon which was shaped by a national vision on urban renewal at a metropolitan—rather than social—scale. Geographically speaking, Denver's Downtown functions as a regional node at the intersection of the I-25—an Interstate Highway that runs from north to south and the I-70—an above lateral Interstate Highway that runs from east to west. Both were completed in 1958 and expanded during 1964, as part of the *Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1956*.<sup>19</sup> By the mid-twentieth century, not only its geography, but also its socio-economic fabric, gained Denver its regional function, power, and image. For a large extent, it was the domination of military and federal programs that gave Denver its distinct social orientation—ultimately affecting the future vision on a public space that is attuned to those forces. In his 1983 essay, *From Cowntown to Sunbelt City: Boosterism and Economic Growth in Denver*, historian Dennis Judd lists the various array of military installations which were landed—or already existing—in, or very near, the Denver Metropolitan Area during the second half of the twentieth century: *The Air Force Academy*; *The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers*; *The Air Force Accounting and Finance Center*; along with *The Lowry Air Force Base and Buckley Naval Air Station*, as well as *The Fitzsimmons Army Hospital* that was expanded into a major regional medical facility.<sup>20</sup> Dominated by military industries and personnel, Denver's regional

supremacy was based on an economy that—according to Judd—was *intricately tied to the Cold War*.<sup>21</sup> To what degree was the mid-twentieth century Denver’s economy affecting the type of vision which shaped its later urban renewal?

### THE SKYLINE URBAN RENEWAL PROJECT

Prompted by both the *1949 Housing Act* and the *Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1956*, *The Skyline Urban Renewal Project*—which was proposed in 1963, executed during the 1970s, and completed in 1984—came in response to the postwar poor housing condition and decayed city’s center.<sup>22</sup> Prior to its implementation, a massive eradication of twenty-seven urban blocks at the heart of Denver’s downtown was managed by the newly established Denver Urban Renewal Authority (DURA) that was formed in 1958, specifically for that mission<sup>23</sup> (Figures 1 and 2). According to *50 Years of Revitalizing Denver*—a municipal document produced in 2008 by the Denver Urban Renewal Authority, the organization was granted with: *The power to acquire blighted property, through condemnation, if necessary, relocate occupants of the property and affect its redevelopment*.<sup>24</sup>

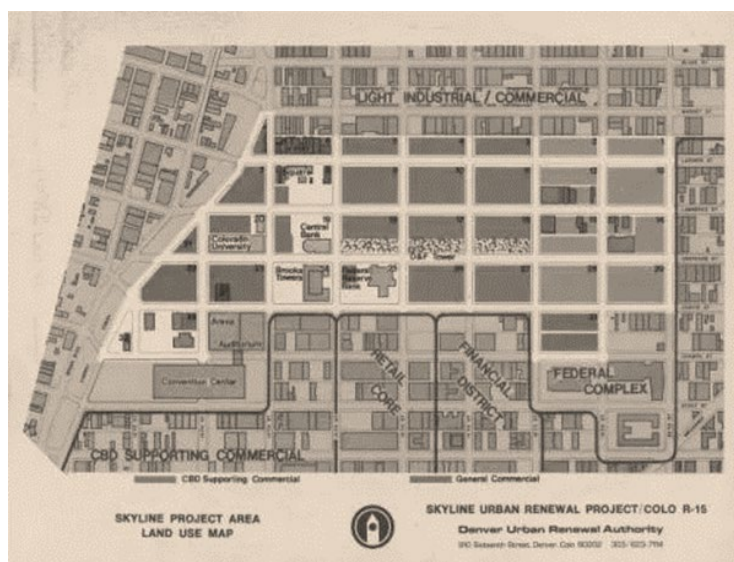


Figure 1. A map of anticipated land uses in the Skyline Urban Renewal Project (Denver Public Library)



*Figure 2. An aerial view of Denver in 1976 approaching Stapleton Airport (Nick DeWolf/Courtesy the Nick DeWolf Foundation)*

The realization of the project was the result of many years of negotiation between the public and the private sectors.<sup>25</sup> It began with the initiation of the *Downtown Denver Master Plan Committee* in 1961. The committee was comprised of both public administration and businessmen. By the end of 1963, the committee produced a set of proposed guidelines for the development of the *Downtown Denver Skyline Project*. Even though the original proposal was rejected by the public in 1964, a vote for the project passed in 1968 with overwhelming support, due to the shift in public opinion following the flood which hit the city three years earlier.<sup>26</sup> The redevelopment plan that stretched over one hundred and twenty acres (equal to the 27 erased blocks) aimed at creating a renewed city's center based on balanced residential and commercial spaces. Despite that declared vision, the project ended up transforming Denver's downtown into a symbolic image of corporate technology.<sup>27</sup>

Moreover, prior to the implementation of the redevelopment plan, the site was the densest area of affordable housing within the city of Denver.<sup>28</sup> One could argue that the seeds for the current homelessness crisis in Denver's downtown were planted not only by the eradication of the dense housing structures, but also by the elimination of that program from public sight. Discussing the ratio between residential and commercial spaces within the *Skyline Urban Renewal Project*, historian Dennis Judd writes:

Redevelopment in the central business district has consisted largely of office space, commercial centers, and hotels. All of DURA's revitalization activities have been located either in the central business district or very close by with the exception of the residential redevelopment program ... The major redevelopment effort continues to be the city's core financial and economic center. The degree to which this commercial revitalization dwarfs DURA's efforts at residential revitalization can only be understood by comparing the dollar investments of the two...<sup>29</sup>

According to Judd, *less than two percent of the private and public investment was committed to residential development*.<sup>30</sup> Citing the *Rocky Mountain News*, Judd notes that:

In 1979 there were only 794 housing units in the Skyline Project. Of these, 590 were subsidized for the elderly or low income ... By 1981, DURA planned to construct an additional 297 units for the elderly and physically disabled. Nearly all of the remaining several hundred housing units in the downtown are luxury condominiums.<sup>31</sup>

While the residential portion of the redevelopment was drastically reduced, at its completion, the project was comprised of five new constructions for public programs and a dozen new buildings for the private sector. Its public programs included: *the new police and fire buildings; a sports arena; libraries; and a giant complex for The Denver Centre for the Performing Arts*. The construction made for the private sector included: *The Mile High Centre; Petroleum Club; Denver Club; First National Bank; Hilton Hotel; Brown Palace West; May D & F; Security Life; Western Federal; Colorado State Bank; Lincoln Centre; Downtown Holiday Inn, and Denver Plaza Hotels*.<sup>32</sup>

With the arrival of a massive amount of office towers and commercial spaces, the *Skyline Urban Renewal Project* dramatically transformed a relatively small area of only twenty-seven blocks in Denver downtown.<sup>33</sup> From a low-rise residential neighbourhood, the site was transformed into a vertical uniformed shining conglomerate, aimed at being viewed from the I-25 Highway as a lavish, dense, modern monumental urban object, which is iconic from the perspective of a car passenger—yet conspicuously blind to its native community.

## **THE SKYLINE PROJECT AS AN EPITOME OF THE NATIONAL PARADOXICAL VISION ON LAVISH / (LIVABLE) CITY**

Seeds for the paradoxicality of the modern American vision on urban renewal were already planted during the late nineteenth century with the birth of "blight" as a legal term in urban planning. The origin of its usage in designating social danger in relation to individuals who retain no connection with homelife marks the intersection between modern moral concerns and spatial practices. Approximately five decades later, under Title I of the *1949 Housing Act*, the term had been used to qualify urban clearance. This radical shift between the passive designation of dangerous urban sites (in relation to homelessness), and the active order to demolish them, testifies to the level of intensified societal aggression in post-World War II America.

Similarly to the practice of urban clearance, as exercised via the *1949 Housing Act*, the massive nationwide housing demolitions exercised via the *Highway Act of 1956*, were yet another manifestation of societal aggression produced by modern ideology. As an expression of the national desire for speed linked to military power, The National Interstate Highways System epitomizes the duality between the fascination with modernity and the aggression it produced. *The Skyline Urban Renewal Project*—the redevelopment project for Denver's Downtown that emerged following these two federal acts and included both massive urban clearance and a housing demolition for the sake of hosting an Interstate Highway, is a perfect example of a production of modern dichotomy of livelihood and destruction.



Figure 3. Image of the Unbuilt Skyline Freeway, 1967 (Denver Public Library) (Denver Public Library)

A marketing image of the project (Figure 3) that was produced in 1967, to sell a vision of its free highway, encapsulates the paradoxicality of the modern American dream on urban renewal as an agency for a simultaneous lavish and livable city. A close observation of the image in relation to the current reality of the site testifies to the gap between the virtual and the actual Denver downtown. The conglomerate of extravagant towers, which replaced what once used to be a dense housing hub, and today serves as a condensed cluster of office towers that provides a backdrop for countless street dwellers, reveals that the project's appearance as viewed from the highway was one of the most acute driving forces. Tangent to the peak of the I-25 curve, the site's visibility from the Interstate Highway at the speed of a car—and its potential iconic presence within the regional setting—played a crucial role in the re-imagining of Denver Downtown. This domination of the image over space—of the appearance of the city over its spatial experience—provides a partial explanation for the level of social neglect as is evidenced via the current homeless crisis.

The other part is more abstract. If *The Skyline Urban Renewal Project* was a product of a modern vision on wealth linked to speed—linked to military power, its clearance and demolition could be read as the turning of the desire for a militant force inward. Moreover, in an economic climate which retained heavy

reliance on the literal Cold War, the elimination of the residential component from the renewal project could be observed as yet another practice of the Cold War—only this time it was a metaphorical one. It was an undeclared war of capital forces and giant corporations on the poor, the disenfranchised, and the disadvantaged subject who, in turn, returned to occupy the City Center twenty years later, only to remind it of its social blindness.

## NOTES

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<sup>17</sup> Fainstein, 14.

<sup>18</sup> Fainstein, 14.

<sup>19</sup>“Historic Timeline“, Colorado Department of Transportation, accessed August 8, 2024 <https://www.codot.gov/about/CDOHistory/centennial/timeline>

<sup>20</sup> Dennis Judd. “From Cowtown to Sunbelt City: Boosterism and Economic Growth in Denver”, In *Restructuring the City: The Political Economy of Urban Redevelopment*, ed. Susan S. Fainstein et al. (New York-London. Longman, 1983), 172.

<sup>21</sup> Judd, 172.

<sup>22</sup> Judd, 179-182.

<sup>23</sup> Judd, 179.

<sup>24</sup> Denver Urban Renewal Authority, *50 Years of Revitalizing Denver* (Denver: 2008), 8.

<sup>25</sup> Judd, *From Cowtown*, 178-181.

<sup>26</sup>Judd, 180.

<sup>27</sup> Judd,186.

<sup>28</sup> “Skyline and Auraria History: An Untold Story of Urban Renewal: Displacement, Gentrification and Wasteful Government Spending”, accessed August 8, 2024, <https://skylineandauraria.wordpress.com/>

<sup>29</sup> Judd, *From Cowtown*, 181.

<sup>30</sup> Judd, 182.

<sup>31</sup> Judd, 182.

<sup>32</sup> Judd, 180.

<sup>33</sup>. “The Hole in the Heart of the City: The Story of Denver’s Urban Renewal”, accessed August 8, 2024, <https://medium.com/@alfredoluiscalvo>.

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