A look at city and history ; Baltimore: Testimony in a federal trial reveals how decisions on public housing in the segregated 1940s influenced patterns of growth for years.: [FINAL Edition]

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ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

University of Wisconsin sociologist Karl Taeuber, testifying for the residents, noted that Baltimore was a segregated city: Whites lived in restricted, outlying areas, while blacks were confined mostly to the city's core. But many black areas had a fair number of whites. "In this sense, Baltimore in 1940 had not developed a modern- style Negro ghetto," he said.

Complexes for whites were generally put in white areas and those for blacks were put in black areas. A pair of notable exceptions were Cherry Hill, a complex for blacks in South Baltimore built on vacant land, and Latrobe Homes on the east side, a complex for whites put on the edge of a black area that [William M. Rohe] said "may have been an attempt by the city to contain the spread of the black ghetto."

Two more public housing complexes opened in the early 1950s -- an addition to Cherry Hill for blacks and Claremont Homes in the Belair- Edison section of East Baltimore for whites. Together with the units built in the 1940s, nearly 7,000 apartments, more than half the family public housing units built in Baltimore, were built during an era of legal segregation.

FULL TEXT

WHATEVER THE outcome of the trial in U.S. District Court on discrimination claims by public housing residents against the city and the federal government, the case has provided a fascinating look at the early development of low-income housing here -- and of Baltimore's inner city as well.

The view comes courtesy of the reports and testimony of expert witnesses for both sides. The experts, like the plaintiffs and the defense, disagree on whether the city and the federal government have willfully perpetuated in recent times the racially segregated system they put in place six decades ago. But there is little dispute about how public housing developed in the years before the 1954 Brown vs. Board of Education Supreme Court decision outlawed racial segregation -- and little doubt that the development influenced patterns of growth for years.

The first of the city's public housing developments was Poe Homes just west of downtown, which opened in 1940 as part of a national New Deal program to improve housing. At the time, Baltimore had 859,000 people, about 200,000 more than today, and would grow by nearly another 100,000 by the end of the decade. One in five residents was black, compared with two of three today. And the housing stock was the worst of any of the country's seven largest industrial centers, with the worst conditions in the black slums that hugged downtown.

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city: Whites lived in restricted, outlying areas, while blacks were confined mostly to the city's core. But many black areas had a fair number of whites. "In this sense, Baltimore in 1940 had not developed a modern- style Negro ghetto," he said.

In all, a dozen housing complexes were built in the 1940s: seven under the New Deal program and five to house World War II industrial workers, with the latter category later used for public housing. Of the 12, six complexes containing about 3,000 units were for whites, and six complexes containing about 3,000 units were for blacks.

"Given the racial composition of the city during the time period, the black population received a disproportionate share of the units built," said William M. Rohe, a professor of city and regional planning at the University of North Carolina and a witness for the federal government. "However, they also tended to live in substandard housing which lacked private kitchens, private toilets and sinks with running water."

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Taeuber, in particular, laid out a persuasive case of the lasting impact of these developments. In Cherry Hill, he said, a "new uniracial enclave" was created. East and west of downtown, racially mixed neighborhoods were destroyed to make way for all-black complexes, increasing the percentage of minority residents. "Public housing was a significant accelerator of ghetto formation in central Baltimore," he said.

Housing complexes developed in the decade after Brown reinforced that formation. They included the four large high-rise developments, since demolished, that came to symbolize public housing for the next four decades. All were constructed near existing developments originally designated for blacks.

Three of them -- Lafayette Courts, Lexington Terrace and Murphy Homes -- opened with virtually all minority tenants, many displaced by urban renewal projects; they remained that way until they were torn down. The fourth, Flag House Courts, had 25 percent black residents when it opened in 1955 and 75 percent black residents 10 years later.

Meanwhile, those projects designated as all-black in the 1940s and early 1950s have remained all-black ever since. Of the white complexes, four -- Fairfield, Westport, Perkins and Latrobe -- quickly became all-black after segregation was outlawed. The others - - Brooklyn, O'Donnell Heights and Claremont -- did not become majority black until the 1990s.

Whether the slower pace of racial change of the latter was a result of discriminatory tenant selection practices or the preferences of public housing residents is among the issues to be decided by the trial.

Illustration

Caption: Baltimore public housing in the 1940s; Credit: SUN STAFF

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