FOREWORD

BY NEAL PEIRCE

It's possible to be deeply caring, as John Gilderbloom is in this book, about the poor, the distressed, the homeless of his "Invisible City." But can one also be pragmatic, rigorous in analysis, and focused unflinchingly on demonstrated results?

It's no easy stretch, but Gilderbloom comes close in this book. He dismisses ideological nostrums about housing, whether they come from the interventionist left or the do-nothing free-market right, and he faults self-interested analyses of the real estate industry. Decent and desirable housing, he suggests, should be an inalienable right for each human in the one life he or she has to lead. It *matters*.

The social concern expressed here comes as a fresh breeze in an America alarmingly focused on such trivia as gilded bathrooms, multi-car garages and bloated square footage, citizens ready to wreak political revenge on anyone who interferes with the sanctity of the middle to upper classes' federal housing tax breaks. (And in fact, with the home mortgage deduction, they do garner the huge majority of federal housing subsidies each budget year.)

The real question isn't whether government plays a role in Americans' housing. It's *how* it can unlock the fiscal and policy doors to decent housing for our disadvantaged, impoverished, and elderly, in the interest of equity, shared community, and the general welfare writ large. Showing the relevance to more people, perhaps, we should take note of the recent years' poignant stories of how teachers, police, firefighters, and government workers are often literally priced out of the places they serve.

Refreshingly, Gilderbloom does not push for some single, magic, nationally applied housing solution. Indeed, one of the most interesting questions

he poses is why some cities seem able to provide affordable housing for a broad swath of their population while others cannot. He raises uncomfortable questions for us to consider. Should we welcome, he asks, the success of such cities as Chicago, Boston, and San Francisco that have added stunning numbers of downtown housing units in the past several years? The price to pay, he alleges, is such broad inflation of all a city's housing costs that the lower-income classes are seriously disadvantaged and "priced out" of their own neighborhoods.

On a similar tack, Gilderbloom faults some of the HOPE VI housing projects of recent years because they do, in fact, create fewer total housing units for very poor people than may have existed before. I'd start on the positive: HOPE VI projects may represent imperfect or incomplete efforts, but they *have* succeeded in a total remake of some of America's most dangerously blighted neighborhoods, in the process creating quite healthy, new, mixed-use communities.

For too long, we had to worry deeply about the future of our great cities. Their new success in drawing middle-class residents, their use of HOPE VI-like devices to dismantle some of the most socially poisonous concentrations of the very poor ever known, represent a heartening social turn I'd prefer to celebrate, not denigrate.

But Gilderbloom does us an immense favor by suggesting sensitive, customized, city-by-city evaluations, based on real-world social and housing market conditions, with a focus on just what steps each community (and I would say citistate region) needs to do to assure satisfactory housing for all income groups among its residents.

In a sense, this relates to a troubling dilemma of American society as a whole. Those who suggest that "the poor have always been with us," that their plight is beyond constructive engagement and change, do us a tremendous disservice. The result of our failure to guarantee correct housing, backup services for hard-pressed mothers, day care for children, community recreation and social services and good schools is a weakening of our nation. It creates enormous burdens—burdens for the deprived families, burdens for all of society in stunted lives, unrealized income and tax yields, and social and criminal system costs.

It may be easier to argue that investment in social services and education will help such families reach a critical turning point. But housing is a critical, indispensable part of the equation; where people live *is* immensely important; to ignore the quality of their shelter is to undercut every other possible investment we make in them, from the federal low-income tax credit to local recreational programs.

Gilderbloom raises the critical question: Why are some cities able to provide affordable housing while others fail in the effort? How can elected and appointed government officials, developers, landlords, and banks work *together* to create the optimal set of policies, ranging from code enforcement to subsidy?

I think he's right in saying extensive research is necessary to find the right—and often elusive—customized answers, community by community, region by region. We need research that encompasses (and balances) existing market forces, the impact of existing government codes and regulations, the roles and potentials of nonprofit, community development groups, and much more. And research that does search out, and check the local applicability of, programs that show a proven track record elsewhere.

Does such research need to be objective, undistorted by self-interested, industry-financed analysis? Well, yes. But who can do this? Certainly competent, disinterested university-based research can be extremely helpful. But perhaps we need to go a significant step further—to create independent panels, government-supported but broadly representative of civic organizations, community groups, and (yes, but only one player from) the real estate organizations. Their job should be to analyze, systematically and regularly and in an academically rigorous way, evolving local and regional housing conditions—to compare local steps with those being undertaken in other cities and states. And then to suggest, to policy-making bodies ranging from their local governments to their state legislatures and executive departments, the mix of specific place-relevant policies and steps that they are convinced can move that city, region, and state closer to adequate housing for all.

The long-range goal—controversial but consistent with John Gilderbloom's vision—should be a mix of types of housing, price points, and decent availability of supply in *every* community. Call that approach, if you will, idealistic, probably expensive, hard to implement. But just consider the alternative—the status quo, the fraying of community, the serious American housing dilemma that we've allowed to develop and fester. Reforming it will be challenging *and* expensive. But inaction, lack of imagination in finding (and funding) new approaches, may prove the most disastrous course of all.

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