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Nicholas Dagen Bloom & Matthew Gordon Lasner (eds.), *Affordable Housing in New York. The People, Places and Policies that Transformed a City*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2016. (\$39.95 cloth). Pp. 336. ISBN 9780691167817.

The present anthology, edited by two professors of urban studies and social science, represents an ambitious and interesting attempt to trace the historical evolution of subsidized housing policies in New York City from the beginning of the 20th century to the present day. The book, quite unique in its own way, is one of the few such works to approach a topic that, so far, has been rather little researched, despite the fact that the large scale of New York's affordable housing developments is unparalleled among America's largest cities.

The editors believe that the history of subsidized housing in New York is a success story, overcoming difficulties encountered by similar projects in other American cities, such as Chicago or Los Angeles. New York officials, architects, reformers and city planners have been able, since the 1910s, to find solutions to address common problems confronting the undertaking of such projects, including the belief that these are not sustainable or that they are a mere waste of public resources. The overview of a century of below-market subsidized housing in New York shows how the projects financed through local or national schemes has led to millions of city residents enjoying affordable and civilized living conditions in America's greatest metropolis. Moreover, the aim of the book is to prove that, for the 21st century as well, the way to achieve equitable and lasting housing outcomes is to continue to use large-scale public subsidies to maintain and build new low and middle-income housing. The authors thus use past examples to inspire a new generation of city leaders to keep advocating for the building of large-scale building complexes.

Although this study is not the first to explore this subject matter, it is probably the only one so far to use a multi-level approach combining history, social sciences, urban planning, architecture, in order to paint a complete picture of affordable housing projects in New York, while also examining their social implications and how they influenced the diversity of the city's various neighbourhoods. While the book includes three richly illustrated galleries providing details about the evolution of housing units

in various building complexes, the focus of the book is more on design outcomes and the social dimensions of architecture and planning.

Since most of the contributors to this volume are historians (be they social, political, or architectural), the book is divided into six chronological chapters that give both an overview of affordable housing issues and projects throughout the 20th century, and a more in-depth view of a wide array of housing complexes built during each decade – including sources of financing, architectural style, design analysis, management, and social history. Moreover, each chapter includes short biographic essays about emblematic figures who made their mark on New York’s affordable housing policies, from mayors like Fiorello LaGuardia and Robert F. Wagner to housing reformers such as Mary Kingsbury Simkhovitch and Charles Abrams. The book is also very richly illustrated with both historic and contemporary photos, many of them published here for the first time.

The first chapter, entitled “Below-market subsidized housing begins,” traces the history of the very first affordable housing projects developed in New York around the 1920s, starting with the revolutionary housing act of 1926 that changed the relationship between government and urban housing in the US. The post-World War I era in the US led to a large-scale construction boom which also saw the completion of the first large-scale below-market subsidized project, Amalgamated Cooperative Apartments, built in the Bronx in 1927. Other important projects of the period included Paul Laurence Dunbar Apartments in Manhattan, Sunnyside Gardens in Queens, and Boulevard Gardens in the same neighbourhood.

The next chapter, “Public neighbourhoods,” continues the story of New York’s affordable housing in the 1930s, when reformers had to solve several conflicts concerning the scope of public housing and lobby for national and state legislation to implement such projects. Their ambition, even in the midst of the Great Depression, was to achieve a functional system of public housing modeled on the example of Western Europe. In 1934, all public housing projects were placed under the authority of the nation’s first housing body, the New York City Housing Association (NYCHA). Affordable housing projects developed in this period included Harlem River Houses in Manhattan, Williamsburg Houses in Brooklyn, and a few other Manhattan projects, such as East River Houses and Amsterdam Houses.

“Public housing towers,” the third chapter, discusses building projects and legislation pertaining to below-market subsidized housing in the postwar era, and it shows why these projects succeeded in New York, whereas they failed in practically all other major cities. The chapter also touches upon the delicate issue of race relations developing in these

building complexes and the struggles to maintain racially integrated housing in the 1940s and 1950s. Projects completed in these decades include Jacob Riis Houses and Johnson Houses in Manhattan, and Ravenswood Houses in Queens.

The fourth chapter, “Stabilizing the middle,” deals with efforts to develop housing projects for middle-income families as well, especially considering the social context of the 1960s, when more and more middle-class Americans began leaving the cities and moving to the suburbia. Consequently, New York acquired the largest system of private affordable housing anywhere outside Western Europe. Most of the building complexes completed in this decade were situated in Queens, where there still were acres of inexpensive land suitable for such projects. In 1955, a landmark law, the Limited Profit Housing Companies Law, was adopted, thus paving the way for hundreds of building complexes which would be built under this very ambitious and generous package of subsidies. Such projects included Stuyvesant Town and Penn Station South in Manhattan, and Bell Park Gardens, Rochdale Village, and Queensview in Queens, Co-op City in the Bronx, and Starett City in Brooklyn.

The penultimate chapter, “Housing reimagined,” tells the story of New York affordable housing projects in the 1970s and 1980s, a time when city leaders remained committed to the idea of government-subsidized housing as being essential to the city’s social and economic health. Certainly, building efforts in this period were not free of problems, from entrenched racialized poverty to the underfunding of maintenance and services, which had a negative impact on many projects. Nevertheless, several important complexes were erected in this period: West Side Urban Renewal Area, Riverbend Houses, Schomburg Plaza, and West Village Houses in Manhattan, and Twin Parks in the Bronx, as well as Marcus Garvey Village in Brooklyn, and Eastwood on Roosevelt Island. Of particular interest here, to my mind, is an essay about the birth of hip hop and its connection to New York subsidized housing: this music style emerged in the 1970s as the urban youth’s response to poverty, racism and the civil rights movement; critics largely believe that the genesis of hip hop can be traced back to a 1973 party at General Sedgwick House, an affordable housing project in West Bronx.

The final chapter, “The decentralized network,” outlines both the decline of subsidized housing projects in New York at the end of the 1980s (because of serious financial and management problems, high rents and housing shortages, significant population losses, widespread abandonment, etc.) and the rise of a new decentralized housing network from the ashes of the welfare state. This network was made up of community development corporations, city and state agencies responsible

for housing, and foundations offering technical assistance. The city now focused more on smaller or larger scale rehabilitation projects, rather than on building new housing complexes. Nevertheless, some housing projects, although fewer than in earlier decades, were completed: Nehemiah Houses, Abyssinian Development Corporation, Hughes House in the Bronx, as well as Melrose Commons and Via Verde, in the same neighbourhood.

So what is the state of affordable housing in New York in the 21st century? According to the editors, the number of subsidized housing units has increased, but it still cannot keep up with the demand, because the overall subsidies for below-market building projects – essentially a very liberal idea, stemming from the belief that middle- and working-class people have a right to quality living conditions – have decreased. A few major challenges they identify include the declining condition of low-income public housing, which makes it vulnerable to natural disasters such as Hurricane Sandy in 2012, and the rising rent prices even under the city's strict rent-control system. A possible solution to these issues is a massive influx of capital to build new housing units and substantially overhaul older ones, as well as a mixture of long-term, below-market interest rate loans, subsidized by the government, with low property taxes.

Certainly, in New York, as in many other places, the efficiency of these possible solutions depends on the goodwill of leaders at city, state, and federal level; however, the editors of the present volume appear to be rather optimistic about the future of affordable housing in New York. By tracing the history of a century of below-market subsidized housing in one of the world's best-known cities, they have proven – consistently, I would argue – that New York is a genuine success story and a leading example in this respect. This is a book worth reading even for those with only a marginal interest in housing policies, because it paints a comprehensive picture of the people, places and policies that have truly transformed a city.

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