

# The New Projects

“The poor would make do, somehow, as they always did.” Marshall Berman, *All That is Solid Melts Into Air*, 1982.

## INTRODUCTION

While the old public housing “projects” have been demolished in Chicago to make way for saccharine sweet mixed-income neighborhoods—in cities like Houston (and suburbs throughout the U.S.) disinvestment, changing desires, and shifting socio-economic and spatial conditions are combining to create the “new projects” on the periphery. The new projects look nothing like the old, the large multi-family developments follow a suburban superblock model—privatized, gated, and disconnected from the surrounding city. The new projects were built quickly and cheaply in the 1970s and 1980s, most often for young professionals, and with little public open space or amenities. Today, these projects are increasingly home to more families than singles and a vastly expanding number of people who live below the poverty line. Furthermore, in the absence of a national housing policy, where vouchers comprise the largest portion of low-income housing subsidies, this housing is, in many ways, the new de-facto public housing and subject to many of the same challenges public housing communities faced fifty years ago. As our focus shifts back to the center of cities the large-scale gated and privatized suburban model is being transplanted and the lessons that should seem evident in the failure of this model remain buried, in other words what it means to develop without attention to or accommodation for public space. It is from this foundation that “The New Projects” interrogates the conditions that have led to the decline and transformation of so much late 20th century multi-family housing and the ground-up strategies that have emerged to intervene in this trajectory.

## SCALE

In Houston the scale of the problem, and the potential salvaging effect of a solution, is immense. 315,357—is the number of multi-family apartments housed in buildings comprised of ten or more units. 40% of this housing, or just over 140,000 units, was constructed between 1960 and 1979 to meet the needs of a rapidly

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expanding population, particularly the baby boomers who were leaving home for the first time. Today, this housing is home to more than 20% of Houston's two million residents. The units are dispersed in roughly 600 separate complexes, with an average of 250 units each, and typically constructed at densities of 30-40 units per acre. Not surprisingly, the new projects are located predominantly outside of the core and many are in a downward spiral of disinvestment. The condition in Houston is comparable to that of the United States overall, where one-third of all rental housing was constructed between 1960 and 1979.<sup>1</sup>

In the period following WWII suburban style development based on the automobile was already the dominant model and the scale of real estate development had transformed—engulfing much larger sites. Scale, therefore, is an important characteristic of the new projects. For example, at the scale of the neighborhood, the multi-family developments are islands, privatized and disconnected from the surrounding context and resources. At the scale of the complex, often occupying 10 acres or more, parking is the most prominent landscape feature and the open space that does exist is often undefined, lacking boundaries to contain it or shape it, and therefore belonging to no one. Social organization, open space, public infrastructure, and a sense of control and ownership are all missing.



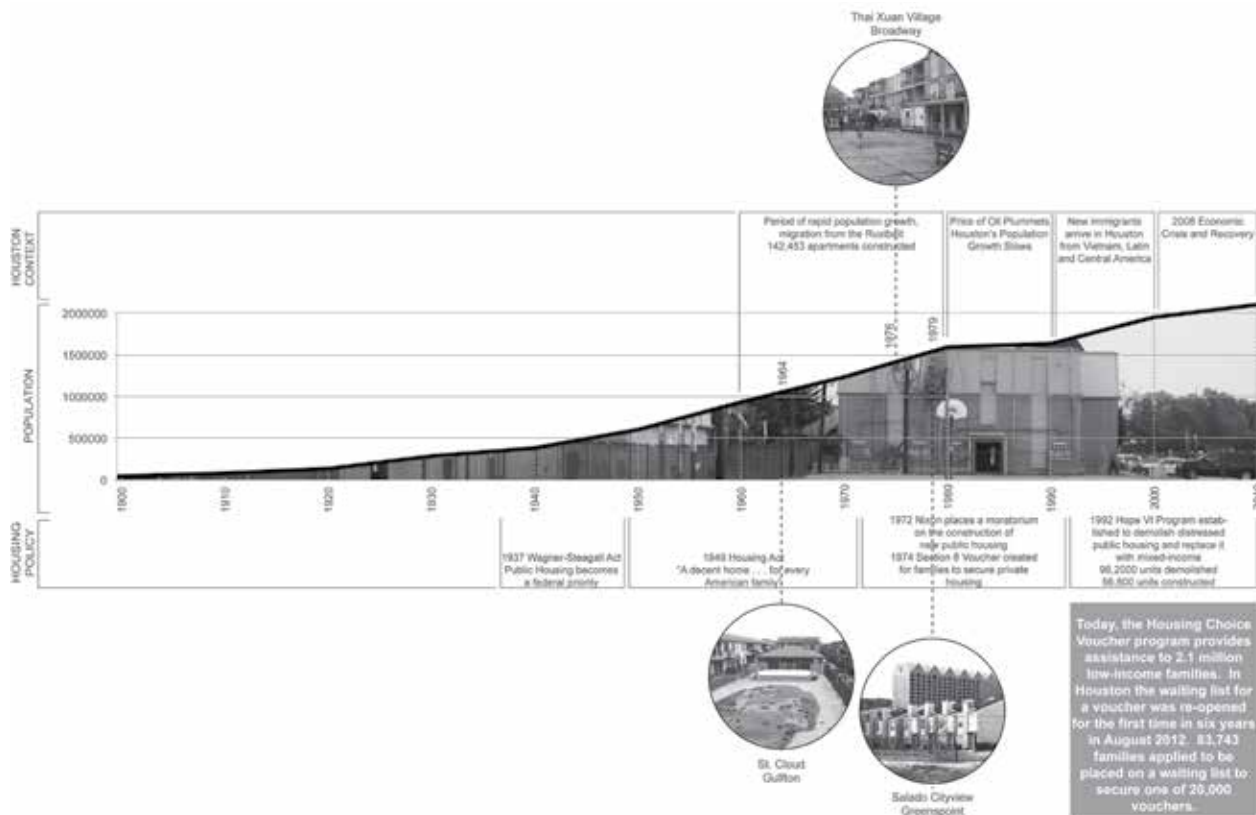
As housing policy, center city displacement, and disinvestment draw more and more families with children to the new projects on the edge of the city the missing public and social infrastructure becomes more poignant—and the need to re-imagine how these complexes can be transformed into a site of hope becomes more pressing.

## HOUSING POLICY

One of the largest factors that have lead to the generation of the new projects is

Figure 1: Map of Multi-Family Housing, Houston.

our current housing policy. A policy that has remained virtually unchanged since 1972 when Nixon placed a moratorium on the construction of new public housing. It is at this point that the housing question shifted from a public priority to a private sector incentive through the voucher system. Today, vouchers represent the largest federal low-income housing subsidy—and for some property owners their primary source of rent. The original goal of the voucher system, a system that was proposed by Jane Jacobs in the *Death and Life of Great American Cities* as the “guaranteed rent method” in 1961, was to provide the freedom of choice to families to decide where they wanted to live.<sup>2</sup> This choice was to lead to accomplishing a secondary goal of de-concentrating poverty. For a time this was a success, but over the last 25 years data suggests that poverty is again concentrating, but this time not in the center of our cities, but instead on the periphery. For example, a recent report by the Joint Center for Housing Studies at Harvard University pointed out that “across the 100 largest metropolitan areas, 45 percent of occupied rental units in 2011 were located in low-income neighborhoods.”<sup>3</sup>



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From the late 19th century (an era typified by the evils of the highly profitable tenement) to today, the question of affordable and decent housing for all Americans—as defined by our national housing policy—has been blown around in the tumultuous winds of societal and political change. Today, the social safety net has profoundly unraveled, a vast and growing inequality between the wealthy and the poor has emerged, and for many families the only real affordable housing available is a “trickle-down” variety. In other words, disinvestment and displacement have created the new projects, distant from the prosperity and opportunity of the center, and these projects have become affordable at the very moment that they have become less desirable.

Figure 2: Housing Policy Timeline.

## PLACE

Place matters. As broad demographic change sweeps our cities, with rising wealth in the center, and increasing poverty in the suburbs, location determines opportunity, health, educational success, and accessibility. In 2009 the Brookings Institution reported that for the first time in U.S. history the percentage of the population living below the poverty line was higher in the suburbs than in the city.<sup>4</sup> Ranking eighth in the United States, the Houston metropolitan region has one of the highest rates of suburban poverty. Between 2000 and 2010 the percentage of poor living in suburban areas in Houston rose from 42% to 51%. Not surprisingly, the majority of distressed apartment complexes are located outside of the center, in large-scale gated and cloistered developments.

## HOW THE CASE STANDS<sup>5</sup>

In the cycle of cities—the boom and bust, creation and destruction, decay and renewal—buildings are increasingly ephemeral, projected forward only through the end of the amortization cycle (typically 30 years), after which there is an impending and even expected obsolescence. As a result, in many young and contemporary cities the majority of the built fabric has been constructed to fail. Large multi-family housing complexes are one of the most prevalent examples of built-in failure, and as a result are one of the most urgent sites of intervention.

As a means to explore the conditions and adaptive capacity of multi-family housing three Houston apartment complexes serve as case studies. What binds these complexes together is the age of the units, the disconnection of the complexes from the surrounding neighborhood, and the shifting demographics. What sets the complexes apart are different levels of social and community organization, economic investment, resiliency and adaptation. In *Death and Life of Great American Cities* Jane Jacobs wrote “one of the unsuitable ideas behind projects is the very notion that they are projects, abstracted out of the ordinary city and set apart.”<sup>6</sup> In this way, the new projects are the same as the old. Two cases, Gulfton and Broadway, illustrate how grounded and organic change can transform decline into opportunity. The third case, Greenspoint, serves as an example on the opposite side of spectrum, in other words ground-up transformation is yet to occur.

## CASE 1: GULFTON

St. Cloud is a quiet oasis in the center of one of Houston’s densest, poorest, and most diverse neighborhoods—Gulfton. But this is not the inner city, it is the periphery—and St. Cloud is not a tenement, it is a simple garden apartment complex—one of nearly 50 similar complexes in a three-square mile area that combined total 15,000 units. Gulfton, once a prime destination for young professional singles moving to the city in the 1970s, began transforming in the late 1980s when Houston’s economy collapsed with the price of oil. As single professionals moved on to greener pastures, new immigrants began arriving in the city and filling the vacated units. Today more than 60% of Gulfton residents were born outside the U.S. and poverty sits at a staggering 39%. But St. Cloud, along with other complexes in the neighborhood, stands in defiance of expectations, and has emerged as a model for transformative organic and grounded strategies.

Sited on a superblock over 600’ in length, St. Cloud is an island, gated and set apart from the surrounding neighborhood. The repeating pattern of courtyards and parking areas are framed by two-story buildings that open to the front and back. This pattern creates the condition where all the units face the open courtyards. As a result the well-defined courtyards are the central gathering and play areas. At one



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time there were four pools in these spaces, today all of them have been filled in. On the site of one former pool is an ad-hoc and petite soccer field, with a 10' fence to prevent the adjacent apartment windows from being broken. On any day you can find men gathered in the courtyard playing the traditional board game carrom, children playing freely, mothers chatting on chairs moved outside to supervise, and pickling jars and container gardens dotting adjacent balconies and carports. In many ways the spatial definition of the courtyards has contributed to realizing change, the shared space is central and watched over by all residents.

Programmatic adaptation has also occurred. Two units have been retrofitted into community spaces, one an after-school program for youth and the other an adult education center. These spaces draw in residents and serve as anchors for building the social infrastructure of the community. Furthering the strategies that have occurred organically, the laundry areas that define the short end of the courtyards, could serve new uses such as community kitchens. Retrofitting existing apartment units is occurring in many Houston complexes, as both residents and property owners look to combat decline, introduce new uses that have the potential to support residents, increase the strength of the community, and provide much needed resources.

What is happening at St. Cloud is a micro-model of transformation that could be expanded by adopting the more ambitious strategies suggested by Jane Jacobs.

Figure 3: St. Cloud, Gulfton.

Jacobs recommended that the ground floor of project buildings be gutted and replaced with a mix of uses or more temporary vendors and markets, and that new streets be introduced to weave the project into the surrounding context. Testing this model at St. Cloud, for example, would translate into creating new streets through the existing parking lots and introducing new uses in buildings adjacent to major streets.

## **CASE 2: BROADWAY**

The history of Thai Xuan Village in Houston is a tale of resiliency. Built in 1976, the complex was originally the Cavalier Apartments, and is one of twenty separate apartment developments lining a one-mile corridor of Broadway near Hobby Airport in south Houston. As in Gulfton, the economic crisis of the 1980s ushered in a period of high apartment vacancies in the area. Flight attendants fled, and other young professionals moved on, disinvestment and decline followed. In 1993 a Vietnamese Catholic priest, Father John Chinh Tran bought the complex, renamed it Thai Xuan Village, and invited new refugees from South Vietnam to live there.

Over the next fifteen years the complex deteriorated, balconies sagged, railings collapsed, and broken windows hinted at an escalating decline. In 2007 elected officials, responding to pressure from neighboring community leaders, began threatening the owners with demolition. The residents fought back, organized a tenant organization, and in 2009 secured \$250,000 in affordable housing funds to upgrade the complex. The sagging balconies are once again plumb, roofs have been repaired, and the exterior has been painted and cleaned.

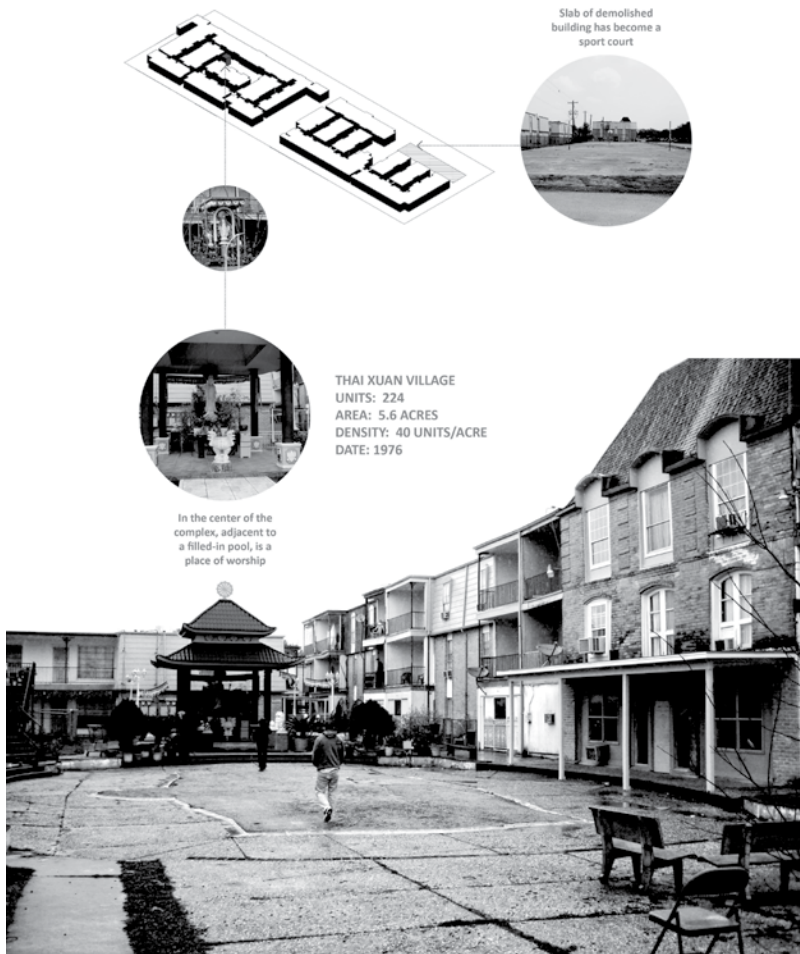
Today, Thai Xuan Village represents organized change and resiliency—a small outdoor chapel sits in the courtyard adjacent to a filled in pool, tenants grow vegetables and fruits in their small yards or on the balconies, a small store occupying a former apartment serves residents' basic needs, and children play basketball on the slab of a demolished building. As Josh Harkinson writes in the *Houston Press*:

“Any sidewalk between any two buildings leads into a valley of microfarms crammed with herbs and vegetables that would confound most American botanists. Entire front yards are given over to choy greens. Mature papaya trees dangle green fruit overhead, and vines sagging with wrinkled or spiky melons climb trellises up second-story balconies. Perfumed night jasmine stretches for light alongside trees heavy with satsumas, limes and calamondins. Where the soil ends, Vietnamese mints and peppers sprout out of anything that will contain roots . . .”<sup>7</sup>

The design interventions at Thai Xuan Village are entirely organic. The gradient from public to private space has been well defined, from the shared public courtyards, to the semi-public fenced gardens and patios, to the individual units (which here are owned as condominiums, many appraised at values between \$5,000 and \$10,000). As a result the maze-like quality of the open spaces has become more defined and more useful.

At Thai Xuan Village residents share a common culture and organized when it was necessary for the future of the complex. While many programmatic interventions, such as small storefronts and vendors selling homegrown vegetables, might be considered extra-legal, Houston is the largest city without zoning, so many things impossible elsewhere are possible here. Continuing to support this infusion of adaptive entrepreneurial uses could support residents and more lasting change, not just in the complex, but in the surrounding neighborhood.





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St. Cloud in Gulfton and Thai Xuan Village in Broadway illustrate how large multi-family complexes can be retrofitted socially, but more needs to be done physically, to ensure that these landscapes are preserved as affordable housing in dense and well-served neighborhoods. As June Williamson and Ellen Dunham-Jones write in regard to Gulfton: “Public investment is needed to further retrofit these places into healthier physical environments—with sidewalks, playgrounds, and transit—but the challenge is to do so without gentrifying a culturally rich community and erasing a needed source of low-income housing.”<sup>8</sup>

### CASE 3: GREENSPPOINT

The profound demographic shifts that have occurred in the last twenty years come sharply into focus in the Greenspoint neighborhood. The seven square mile neighborhood located in suburban north Houston has one of the highest concentrations of multi-family housing within the city limits, at 11,000 units. Over the last twenty years, working class families have replaced single-person professional households and as a result population density in the neighborhood has increased by a factor of 1.5. For example, according to the U.S. Census, only 2,500 people below the age of 18 lived in Greenspoint in 1990. By 2000, this number had skyrocketed to over 12,400, and by 2010, it climbed yet again to 14,000 representing 36% of the total population. Over 34% of households currently live below the federal poverty level. Compounding a challenging situation, there are few basic amenities such as

Figure 4: Thai Xuan Village, Broadway.

grocers, pharmacies, community services, libraries, or youth programs available to Greenspoint residents. Over 24% of households do not own a car and depend solely on relatively limited public transportation.

Greenspoint is a community divided—lands comprised of a large and dying mall, office towers, multi-family housing, and strip retail development are disconnected and isolated from each other both physically and demographically. Fundamentally there are two communities—one that caters to area office workers and one for those who call the neighborhood home. The division is illustrated by the fact that the retail and restaurants serving the area's office workers close during the evening and on weekends.

The Salado at Cityview (part of a much larger holding of apartments) is located in the heart of the Greenspoint neighborhood. The complex has 318 units on 9.6 acres, and was built in 1979. The apartment units were fully renovated in 2006 in an attempt to once again draw young professionals to the area, the attempt failed, and as a result the property went into bankruptcy. In 2012 the development emerged from bankruptcy with a new owner, the eleventh since the property was constructed in 1979. In fact, the current owner of Salado at Cityview owns a total of eleven complexes in Greenspoint, 25% of all multi-family housing in the area, or 2712 units. One of the primary investors, Steve Moore, moved into a nearby complex to understand first hand what the challenges in the complexes were. Since moving in he put in place a 10 p.m. curfew and a dress code which includes no sagging or skimpy clothing. Adjacent Greenspoint Mall also has a no "baggy pants" policy. Today, the complex is very affordable, rent on a one-bedroom apartment is \$500 and rent on a large two bedroom is \$700. But affordability is also a factor of the state of distress of the complex and the overall decline and disinvestment in the surrounding neighborhood. As of yet the complex exhibits little evidence of the resiliency or change apparent at the two other case studies.

Exploring the possibilities for retrofitting the apartment complex by weaving new programs and public infrastructure into the site is a key strategy for challenging isolation. New programs would support the changing needs in the community and the families that call it home. For example, programmatic interventions could include community gardens, day care centers, after-school programs, sport courts, and playgrounds. Public infrastructure interventions such as new parks, open spaces, and streets, could take advantage of leftover spaces, particularly unused parking, to become a framework to re-connect the complex into the greater community.

Finding ways to sustain the effort to upgrade the physical and social infrastructure of the "new projects" means working to meet the needs of the families that have displaced singles in many apartment complexes, including Salado at Cityview.

## **CONCLUSION**

The profound demographic changes transforming the periphery of our cities, and the new challenges facing families who reside there, require that we develop new tools to comprehensively understand and address the changing suburban landscape. To this end, defining an adaptive process for aging multi-family complexes is a pressing issue, one that has the potential to preserve affordable housing and push against the possibility of future failure and demolition. Furthermore, as the "big" projects migrate to the core of our cities it is imperative to learn from our mistakes. We need to understand that housing models without the capacity to





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adapt to new demographics or without built-in diversity are at risk of failing at some point in time. And that the closed system, a system disconnected and cut-off from the city around it, such as the large-scale multi-family complex, has an inherently higher risk of failure.

Change has to occur across systems—social, economic, and environmental—and across scales—from the individual unit, to the grounds, to the relationship of the complex to the larger community. St. Cloud and Thai Xuan Village point to the strategies and systems that have the potential to transform decline into opportunity. Greenspoint illustrates that transformations that have little to do with the population often fail. In the end, working in partnership with residents to identify and adopt design interventions that diversify and connect the complexes can be a productive way to preserve what has become the largest collection of affordable housing in Houston, and likely in suburban landscapes across the U.S.

In conclusion, there are two options for the future of the new projects: demolish or adapt. The powerful are pushing for demolition, which would create a 21st century re-development opportunity at a scale not witnessed since urban renewal. Yet, quietly throughout Houston, innovative models for the new projects are emerging—complexes and apartments are retrofitted for charter schools, places of worship, community centers, small businesses, and youth programs. Gardens, sports fields and gathering places have transformed formerly ornamental green spaces into useful areas. Social organization is strengthening in complexes where it is nurtured and supported by the physical infrastructure. And new funding programs for the renovation of aging multi-family complexes are emerging on the national front. Yet, more needs to be done, documenting success, either organic or planned is part of the solution, understanding failure is the second part. Defining a methodology to adapt multi-family complexes has the potential to preserve hundreds of thousands of affordable housing units and push against the possibility of future failure and demolition.

Figure 5: Salado at Cityview, Greenspoint.

## ENDNOTES

1. Joint Center for Housing Studies. "America's Rental Housing: Evolving Markets and Needs." (Boston: Harvard University 2013). See page 35, 2.2 million families depend on housing choice vouchers to secure housing in the open market and 1.3 million families secure housing at private developments through project-based assistance, together this represents 76% of all subsidized housing (not including rural housing).
2. Jane Jacobs. *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (New York: Vintage Press 1961). See Chapter 17: "Subsidizing Dwellings," pages 322-337.
3. Joint Center for Housing Studies. "America's Rental Housing: Evolving Markets and Needs." (Boston: Harvard University 2013). See page 16.
4. Garr, Emily and Kneebone, Elizabeth. "The Suburbanization of Poverty" (2009). Brookings Institution. Available at <http://www.brookings.edu/research/papers/2010/01/20-poverty-kneebone>
5. Riis, Jacob. *How the Other Half Lives* (New York: Penguin Books 1997). The title for this section of the paper comes from the final chapter of Riis' seminal book.
6. Jane Jacobs. *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (New York: Vintage Press 1961). See Chapter 20: "Salvaging Projects," page 394.
7. Harkinson, Josh, "Tale of Two Cities," *Houston Press*, December 15, 2005. Available at <http://www.houstonpress.com/2005-12-15/news/tale-of-two-cities/>.
8. Dunham-Jones, Ellen and Williamson, June. *Retrofitting Suburbia: Urban Design Solutions for Redesigning Suburbs* (New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, Inc. 2009). See page 32.