

**INVENTING COMMUNITY RENEWAL:  
THE TRIALS AND ERRORS THAT SHAPED  
THE MODERN COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT CORPORATION**

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**Part One***Gray Areas and the Independent Local Agency*

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Chapter 1: Broken Promises	9
Chapter 2: Urban Removal	13
Chapter 3: Opportunity, Empowerment, Coordination	15
Chapter 4: An Optimist's Faith	21
Chapter 5: The 'Independent Agency' Meets 'Maximum Participation'	27
Chapter 6: The "Graying" of New Haven	37
Chapter 7: Participation and Its Discontents	47
Chapter 8: Something Short of Salvation	51

**PART ONE**

**GRAY AREAS AND THE INDEPENDENT LOCAL AGENCY**

**ROBERT COHEN**

*These unhappy times call for the building of plans that build from the bottom up and not from the top down, that put faith once more in the forgotten man at the bottom of economic pyramid.”*

*—Franklin Delano Roosevelt,  
April 7, 1932*

*The big city is like a mother's knee to many who have strayed far and found the roads rough beneath their uncertain feet. At dusk they come home and sit upon the door-step.*  
—O. Henry, “Supply and Demand”

Well before phrases like “juvenile delinquency” and “the pathology of the ghetto” began signaling to mainstream America that something was wrong in its urban centers, America’s cities were undergoing a series of profoundly distressing and seemingly irreversible transformations. Massive migrations were altering the composition and function of urban neighborhoods—migrations into and out of cities, from central-city cores to outer-city peripheries, and from cities to their inner ring of suburbs. Amid all the coming and going, the prevailing economic winds were blowing outward, sucking out the economically productive mainstream populations of cities—those who were white-collar and affluent, or blue-collar and comfortably-off, or even self-sufficient in retirement. Those left behind or newly arrived were increasingly black, brown, and poor.

Yawning deficits in consumer income and purchasing power, emerging signs of housing abandonment and decay, boarded-up churches, and falling rates of mass-transit ridership and school enrollment blighted long-established neighborhoods. In these areas, it seemed, the only growth was crime-related. Millions of African Americans who had left the depressed rural South for the cities of the North found that the urban “promised land” (the title of Nicholas Lemann’s best-selling history of the period) was more a concrete ruin than a land of milk and honey.

This in-migration of poor minorities—typically poorly trained and educated, if at all—was itself a crucial catalyst in the decline of America’s central cities. But the parallel and complementary out-migration of skilled and better-educated whites seemed to tell a separate, equally damning story of a lost urban franchise. However much the white, middle-class flight was fueled by racial bias and real-estate panic, some sizable share of it was also a simple preference for suburbs, with their spacious lots and private, ultramodern houses, their comparatively low taxes (made possible by massive state and federal subsidies) and social homogeneity. Soon industry was following its employees and managers across the city limits—and in time, to the South and the West—in search of cheaper, non-unionized labor as well as cheaper, safer, more plentiful space.

The free-fall of the cities was, in fact, something of a chain reaction. Industrial relocation, along with massive industrial restructuring and technological change, ignited a precipitous drop in opportunities for the unskilled migrant labor force (especially young males). The resulting high unemployment rate, which was already proving impervious to broader economic conditions by the mid-’50s, meant that the

purchasing power of the inner city households was in steep decline. That in turn led to the flight of retail business from urban centers and an eroding tax base. Smaller revenues meant an erosion of local public services, especially schools. From weaker schools came a more and more unskilled—and ultimately unemployable—labor force.

More and more, cities that had once provided an avenue out of poverty for generations of new arrivals seemed instead to be turning into economic graveyards. In the past, poor inner-city families (particularly foreign immigrants) had gradually scaled the economic ladder from generation to generation—gradually moving up but not necessarily out. Now, in this spiral of urban decline, poverty was becoming intergenerational. The city as social escalator had suddenly stopped cold.

The depredation of the inner cities was therefore becoming as much a social as physical phenomenon—a concentration of failing people in failing neighborhoods. Programs and systems set up to renew the “physical plant” of urban areas—the bricks and mortar of their buildings and infrastructure—found themselves confronting behavioral as well as economic poverty, evidenced by a startling concentration of dysfunctional “multi-problem families.” These families were typically headed by women, many of whom depended on welfare, and whose (often illegitimate) children were likely to be doing poorly in poor schools and becoming behavioral problems in school and out.

The deteriorating family structure was mirrored in a ruptured social fabric, a disintegration of community evident in undermined religious, social, and cultural institutions. The phrase “pathology of the ghetto,” (first used by sociologist Kenneth Clark, though its later adoption by Daniel Patrick Moynihan provoked a firestorm) conveyed the notion that the social deviancy of inner-city behavior could not be neatly disentangled from the receding labor market and the eroding tax base. It was all bound up—poverty and poverty-related social problems, socially destructive forces and the economic and demographic dislocations that helped unleash them.

The term “underclass,” another red flag, would eventually be used to describe (amid ferocious controversy) the unemployed, underemployed, and ultimately, unemployable population of these communities. (It was first used in this context by the Swedish economist and sociologist Gunnar Myrdal, in the early '60s, but took the better part of two decades to work its way into common usage.) Lemann points out that the very idea of an “underclass” represented a profound shift in our understanding of poverty in this country, because it suggested that poverty was somehow permanent and inbred. That idea, particularly when applied to cities, up-ended Americans' presumption that opportunity eventually cured all misery—that today's huddled masses would, by dint of effort and economic growth, naturally become tomorrow's success story. The great 19th Century cities, and even their slums, had been what Mitchell Sviridoff calls “transmission belts for mobility”—way stations on the road to the mainstream. For roughly a century and a half, they had performed this function brilliantly for earlier generations of migrants and immigrants. But then, without warning, they simply stopped.

Was that because of deficiencies in these newer (mostly black) in-migrants, as the term “underclass” suggested to some? Or was it the racially and economically unjust and hostile society that these migrants encountered upon moving to the cities? These

would become consuming questions—litmus-test questions—for a generation or more of activists, academics, and anti-poverty problem solvers.

Whatever one's answer, mainstream acceptance of the term “underclass” carried with it an implicit, if not denotative, understanding that for the new slum dwellers, poverty was essentially life-long—and that their promised land, their cities, constituted a dead end. That understanding was an affront to American optimism, which, like its cities, was in urgent need of renewal.