

## Introduction

It is apparent that the slum is more than an economic phenomenon. The slum is a sociological phenomenon as well. Based upon a segregation within the economic process, it nevertheless displays characteristic attitudes, characteristic social patterns which differentiate it from adjoining areas. And it is this aspect of slum life that is especially significant from the standpoint of community organization. The slum sets its mark upon those who dwell in it, gives them attitude and behavior problems peculiar to itself.

HARVEY W. ZORBAUGH, *The Gold Coast and the Slum*

Most of the social problems found in slums cannot be traced to the area itself. Undoubtedly, some people live in slums because they have problems or unacceptable behavior patterns. But economic and social conditions, rather than the slum itself, have caused these.

HERBERT J. GANS, *The Urban Villagers*

It may be surprising to learn that, in a region of the country notorious for its rugged individualism and suspicion of meddling federal government, most large cities embraced public housing to the applause of civic leaders committed to federally sponsored slum clearance and urban redevelopment. This book explores the experiences of five of the largest cities in the U.S. Southwest—Albuquerque, Dallas, Houston, Phoenix, and San Antonio—to shed light on the little-known story of the region's war on slums, a war that employed public housing and federally sponsored slum clearance. It examines how closely the southwestern story follows the national account of efforts to eliminate slums and provide public housing for the needy and whether there is a distinctly regional response. One study of southern urbanism argues that cultural patterns in Dixie shaped the fabric of southern cities and promoted a distinctive pattern of urbanism and urbanization.<sup>1</sup> This analysis of slum clearance and public housing in the Southwest questions the notion that regional cultural patterns determined how civic and political leaders responded to the opportunities to clear slums offered by the federal government between the 1930s and the 1960s.

The decision to focus on the five cities examined here was not whimsical. My longtime study of Dallas helped me formulate this book initially as an investigation of Texas cities only. As the importance of the role of states in the plight of public housing and slum clearance became increasingly clear, I sought to expand the study to other cities in the Southwest. Albuquerque and Phoenix were logical choices not only because of the role of each as the leading city in its state, but also because (unlike Dallas, Houston, and San Antonio) both formed part of the New Southwest. Their inclusion therefore would allow me to compare how the Old Southwest and the New Southwest responded to public housing opportunities and slum clearance needs. Because I was committed to a close examination of documents in each city, I limited the number of cities to five.

Although at one level this study examines what role (if any) region played in the implementation of federal slum clearance and public housing programs, it focuses primarily on three themes in twentieth-century urban history: the quest to rid cities of slums, the quest to provide public housing for low-income residents, and the quest to maintain the downtown area as the dynamic center of the city. It differs from previous historical investigations of slum clearance and public housing in its examination of a region in which cities were expanding and dynamic, experiencing massive growth in their population, spatial size, and economic development. A greater optimism permeated those places, despite the reality of their slums and the declining dominance of their downtown areas. Much emphasis has been placed on the failures of public housing and urban redevelopment in the East and Midwest, but little has been placed on the Southwest. We know a great deal about public housing and slum clearance in New York, Philadelphia, Boston, Detroit, Cincinnati, Chicago, and other such cities;<sup>2</sup> we know very little, however, about these issues in Houston, Phoenix, San Antonio, and Dallas, four of the ten largest cities in the nation today.

In addition, the literature on public housing usually focuses on cities with large black populations and sees race as the key factor affecting the program's implementation. In the Southwest, black slums were sometimes not as threatening to the city as Mexican American barrios. By focusing on the Southwest and on several cities with few African Americans, this study adds a new chapter to the history of slum clearance and public housing: the role that race and ethnicity played in the Southwest story. This in no way discounts the importance of race in Texas cities such as Dallas and Houston, where racial concerns clearly drove policy decisions at times. Instead, it seizes the opportunity to explore whether other issues were central factors in shaping public housing and slum clearance policies in cities with fewer African Americans.<sup>3</sup>

By examining selected cities of the Southwest, this book corrects some misconceptions about the role of slum clearance and public housing in the region. We have been told that the Sunbelt benefited significantly from government-sponsored urban redevelopment.<sup>4</sup> But of the five cities studied here, only one, San Antonio, secured any federally funded urban redevelopment projects before 1970. Southwestern cities developed more public housing (a social program)

than slum-clearing urban redevelopment (often viewed as an economic program) between 1935 and 1970. Conservative businessmen, opponents of public housing by some accounts, took the lead in promoting housing projects in several of the cities.<sup>5</sup>

By exploring how five southwestern cities responded to these federally sponsored opportunities to clear slums and erect public housing, this study also considers the role of state governments in these efforts. Because of the nature of city charters and cities' total dependence on the state for authority to act on urban problems (known as Dillon's Rule), historians of the nineteenth-century American city have long emphasized the importance of state-urban ties.<sup>6</sup> Once cities secured home rule at the beginning of the twentieth century, the story goes, they gained much of the power necessary to control their own plight. During the 1930s, when city-federal interactions increased, it appeared to some that the state's relevance to the city diminished further. Often neglected in this story, however, is the role played by state legislatures in providing the necessary enabling laws for cities to participate in programs such as public housing and urban redevelopment between the 1930s and the 1960s. State courts, which ruled on the legalities of new state laws and could delay or expedite new social and economic programs, also became critical actors. One of the findings of this study is that states continued to play a major role in the ability of cities to respond to their social and economic problems.

Although slum clearance and public housing have received significant attention from urban historians in recent years,<sup>7</sup> little attention has centered on the changing assumptions about the impact of slums on the city and the corresponding effect on public policy. In the 1930s and 1940s, reformers and scholars such as Harvey Zorbaugh identified the slum as a "sociological phenomenon" that "sets its mark upon those who dwell in it."<sup>8</sup> But by the 1950s, social scientists such as Herbert Gans were questioning such assumptions about slums' impact. In the new view, "Slums simply attracted problem families."<sup>9</sup> Slum dwellers' problems, according to this new perspective, stemmed from larger economic and social conditions that limited their opportunities and thus confined them to a part of the city that offered them little hope of improvement. Indeed, the lack of jobs, education, and other institutional opportunities made it almost impossible for slum dwellers to improve their lot. Slums still seemed menacing, however, because they were "eating away at the heart of the cities, especially their downtown areas."<sup>10</sup> In the new view, the slum no longer shaped human behavior, but they did threaten the economic well-being of the downtown area (see Appendix A).

While this account of the changing nature of the war on slums in the Southwest focuses on a region, then, it adds to our understanding of the implementation of national policy on slums and public housing. It begins in the 1930s, when the federal government launched a war on slums on the basis of a socio-pathological definition of slums that took shape in the first third of the twentieth century. Advocates of this view no longer regarded slums simply

as sites occupied by low-income people living in poor housing in areas rife with vice, crime, filth, and disease.<sup>11</sup> Instead, the new-breed urban reformers defined slums as places characterized by shabby buildings; narrow, crowded, and cluttered streets; high population densities; dilapidated and deteriorating dwellings; mixed land use (residential, commercial, and industrial); and mixed socioeconomic, racial, ethnic, and religious groups (although slums occupied by Mexican Americans and African Americans proved less heterogeneous than those occupied by Europeans). The reformers thought of these areas “as detached from the city as a whole” but also as tending to spill over into abutting neighborhoods. As a result, slums represented a “distinctive area of disintegration and disorganization,” a cancer-like force that undermined the sense of community and of social and civic responsibility among slum dwellers, even those not yet poverty stricken (their likely fate, thought the slum warriors), and threatened the welfare of the entire metropolis.<sup>12</sup>

Starting in the 1930s, the federal government developed several programs to clear slums and provide adequate housing for low-income residents. During President Herbert Hoover’s final year in office, Congress passed the Emergency Relief and Construction Bill, which authorized the Reconstruction Finance Corporation (RFC) “to make loans to corporations formed wholly for the purpose of providing for families of low income or for reconstruction of slum areas.”<sup>13</sup> Only one project, a slum clearing venture, was completed under this program: The Knickerbocker Village was erected on the lower East Side of Manhattan on five acres (four city blocks) that included the infamous Lung Block.<sup>14</sup> The following year, the New Deal’s National Industrial Recovery Act authorized the Housing Division of the newly formed Public Works Administration (PWA) to continue the RFC loan program with modifications and authorized grants and loans to states, municipalities, and other public bodies for slum clearance and public housing.<sup>15</sup> When that program resulted in few projects because of high costs and lack of equity capital on the part of the applicants, the Housing Division proceeded to undertake slum clearance and public housing directly. The new program also met with limited success partly because of court rulings that complicated slum clearance and because of limited financial support for the program.<sup>16</sup>

But after the reelection of President Franklin D. Roosevelt, Congress passed the Housing Act of 1937, creating the first permanent program for slum clearance and public housing. The act transferred much of the power to build public housing from the federal government to local public housing authorities, which would receive grants and loans from the U.S. Housing Authority for these purposes. The legislation drew significant opposition from the real estate and building industries. But it also divided public housing advocates, some of whom wanted to place greater emphasis on vacant-land housing projects that would draw people away from the slums, and some of whom wanted to clear the slums immediately and erect public housing on the site. Although the legislation allowed for both, advocates of slum clearance, supported by the general public, won the day.<sup>17</sup>

Congress added another effort to its war on slums when it approved the Housing Act of 1949. That law not only expanded the established public housing program by authorizing the construction of 810,000 units in large-scale community development projects over a six-year period, but it also included more opportunities for slum clearance under urban redevelopment. Using the urban redevelopment program, cities could clear slums and offer the land at marked-down prices to private or public interests for redevelopment. The law also authorized the clearing of deteriorated or deteriorating nonresidential areas as long as developers converted the land for predominantly residential uses.<sup>18</sup> The emphasis remained on slums and “predominantly residential use,” since, according to one congressman, “the primary purpose of federal aid in this field is to help remove the impact of the slums on human lives rather than simply to assist in the redevelopment or rebuilding of cities.”<sup>19</sup>

Although the Housing Act of 1954 continued to focus on eliminating the slum, its public housing program differed from that of the Housing Act of 1949. The 1949 act focused on slum clearance because slums appeared to pose serious threats to the health and civic vitality of cities. The Housing Act of 1954 provided a more comprehensive approach to housing that included slum prevention through rehabilitation and conservation. Indeed, it required all interested cities to submit a Workable Program that included requirements for housing and building codes, zoning, and effective subdivision regulation. The Housing Act of 1954 also allocated 10 percent of all clearance projects for nonresidential uses. That allotment increased to 20 percent in 1959 and to 30 percent in 1961. The increase reflected the growing influence of businessmen, who seemed more preoccupied with protecting the downtown area than with saving slum dwellers from their threatening environment.<sup>20</sup> But it also reveals a shift in the thinking about the “housing problem” that led from a singular focus on slums and slum dwellers to a growing concern about city housing and a need to make various types of dwellings available to diverse city constituencies.<sup>21</sup>

Indeed, the 1954 act reduced the role of traditional public housing. First, it allotted far fewer units (35,000 by June 30, 1955) than the Housing Act of 1949, and second, it mandated that cities in need of only relocation housing qualified for additional public housing.<sup>22</sup> In addition, the federal government provided mortgage insurance under section 221 of the Housing Act of 1954 for those uprooted by slum clearance to acquire relocation housing in the private sector and under section 220 “for rehabilitation of existing dwellings and the construction of new accommodations” in “an area of slum clearance and urban redevelopment” or in an “urban renewal area.”<sup>23</sup>

Readers of this book should be mindful that some scholars conflate urban redevelopment and urban renewal, a practice that causes confusion and misunderstanding.<sup>24</sup> Urban redevelopment and urban renewal share some but not all features. The Housing Act of 1949 called for urban redevelopment, a program of slum clearance and housing development on the cleared land by means of either private or public agents. The 1954 act that created urban renewal

expanded the focus of legislation to slum prevention approaches—including rehabilitation, conservation, and spot clearance—in addition to the clearance of slums and blighted areas for commercial and industrial development. Urban renewal, then, went beyond urban redevelopment by concentrating on salvageable neighborhoods and by replacing a unilateral focus on removing slums with a focus on improving housing throughout the city and metropolitan area. This strategy would prevent future slums by emphasizing the rehabilitation and conservation of old neighborhoods through various means, including the development (or revision) and enforcement of zoning laws, housing and building improvements, and efforts to preserve historic properties in those areas.

Indeed, urban *renewal* brought hope to cities and city dwellers everywhere, conveying the message that although cities had problems, they were not in themselves problematic; rather, they offered citizens a lively and diverse environment. Under the citizen participation clause of the Housing Act of 1954, urban renewal encouraged city dwellers to become involved in improving/perfecting the metropolitan arena of choices, offering residents the chance to define their own lifestyles and to experience a variety of landscapes and neighborhoods.<sup>25</sup>

Although the Housing Act of 1954 authorized urban renewal, it did not mark the end of slum clearance and urban redevelopment introduced by the Housing Act of 1949. Indeed, the slum clearance and urban redevelopment provisions of the 1949 act were retained as part of the more inclusive renewal approach. The Housing Act of 1954 ensured that those who wanted to use slum-clearing urban redevelopment would be forced to embrace the more comprehensive approach that included the slum prevention facet of the Workable Program.<sup>26</sup> Indeed, little slum clearance and urban redevelopment had been executed before 1954 because of litigation, the need for enabling legislation, and the red tape of the federal bureaucracy.<sup>27</sup> Like public housing, these programs were all voluntary and could not be imposed on local communities by the federal government.

As long as slums seemed to threaten people's behavior by promoting a setting that discouraged good citizenship and caused ill health and crime, reformers and business-led city builders focused not only on the elimination of the slums but also on the development of public housing projects for low-income residents who were destined to be destroyed by slum life. Public housing, they believed, would encourage behavior that would lead to a productive life. Even the booming southwestern cities understood the threat of the slums and acknowledged that slum conditions seemed to menace the city's health, safety, and sense of order because of the kind of lifestyles they created. Numerous studies documented the intolerable living conditions that men, women, and children faced in the 1930s. Southwestern business leaders, who saw themselves as city builders, listened to the concerns of reformers and citizens about the economic, social, and physical consequences of the slums. Moreover, by the 1930s slums had come to be seen as so problematic that federal intervention

seemed necessary—intervention that led to slum clearance and public housing not only to save vulnerable slum dwellers but also to produce community development housing projects with residential settings that could shape low-income residents into contributing members of urban society.

Because the so-called slum problem had taken on dimensions that reflected changing assumptions about the nature of the city and the slum by the 1950s, federal legislation embraced a different strategy in the war on slums. This study explores how civic leaders attempted to employ the new tactics in the Southwest and explains why they were not always successful. It argues that these changes in the perception of the problems associated with slums, more than some regional mind-set, influenced both the response of civic leaders and the call for public housing.<sup>28</sup>

Such changes were symptomatic of greater post-World War II societal changes that reflected what one author has characterized as a larger transformation in dominant assumptions about the nature of American society characterized by a shift from “cultural determinism” to “cultural individualism.”<sup>29</sup> Possibly in response to the new authoritarian governments associated with Italy, Germany, and the Soviet Union, the 1950s saw an increased emphasis on individual choice that dominated the public discourse. The post-World War II Red Scare, associated with Joseph McCarthy and the House Un-American Activities Committee, was complemented by a more general and pervasive antisocialist and libertarian sentiment that stoked an antigovernment animus that persisted beyond the 1950s and has remained a staple feature of American politics well into the second decade of the twenty-first century.<sup>30</sup>

Chapter 1 starts with a brief history of the five central cities under examination. It focuses on their economic and political characteristics in the 1930s and contrasts the cities of the Old Southwest (Texas) with those of the New Southwest (New Mexico and Arizona). Chapter 2 examines each city’s early effort to secure public housing by looking at the role of the federal government in publicizing the slum problem in these southwestern cities and identifying the local leaders of each city’s movement, their rationale, and the resistance to the projects. The chapter also looks at the characteristics shared by all five cities in the public housing movement. Chapter 3 explores efforts to implement slum-clearing public housing under the Housing Act of 1937, paying particular attention to how each city’s well-documented slum problem promoted citizens’ support for and local governments’ assent to pursuit of these programs. Chapter 4 examines the impact of World War II on the public housing program and traces postwar plans for additional slum clearance and public housing.

Chapters 5 and 6 trace the consequences of the redefinition of the slum problem. Chapter 5 considers how all five cities responded to the public housing opportunities that the Housing Act of 1949 offered. It underscores the initial enthusiasm that passage of the housing bill generated in most of the cities and then traces the opposition to public housing that arose, despite generally

well-run and successful programs. Toward that end, it examines new controversies that public housing generated at the time and their impact on each city's will to continue the program. The chapter also documents the growing effectiveness of the anti-public housing lobby and links it to a new mode of thinking about the relationship between the individual and the larger city that emerged in the 1950s.

Chapter 6 investigates the changing nature of the war on slums through the urban redevelopment and urban renewal programs and explores the challenge posed by the required state enabling legislation and the impact of the Workable Program feature of the Housing Act of 1954. The chapter also traces the shift in focus from the impact of slums on their residents to slums as an economic threat to the vitality of nearby downtown areas and documents how a new discourse about citizen rights in the late 1950s influenced the fate of slum clearance, urban redevelopment, and urban renewal programs. The Epilogue briefly explores how post-1965 federal legislation pertaining to public housing and slums reflected the new public discourse that emphasized the problem of the urban poor as opposed to the problem of the slum as a place. It uses the Model Cities Program to underscore the distance between urban policies of the 1930s and those of the late 1960s. Together, these chapters seek to not only tell the story of slum clearance and public housing in the Southwest but also to show how the changing public discourse about the city and its residents fostered significant shifts in national policy.<sup>31</sup>