

On this page, Boston's infamous Columbia Point project, top, before it was rebuilt as Harbor Point, below. Opposite, before and after photos of Richmond's Cary 2000 project.



# new hope for failed housing

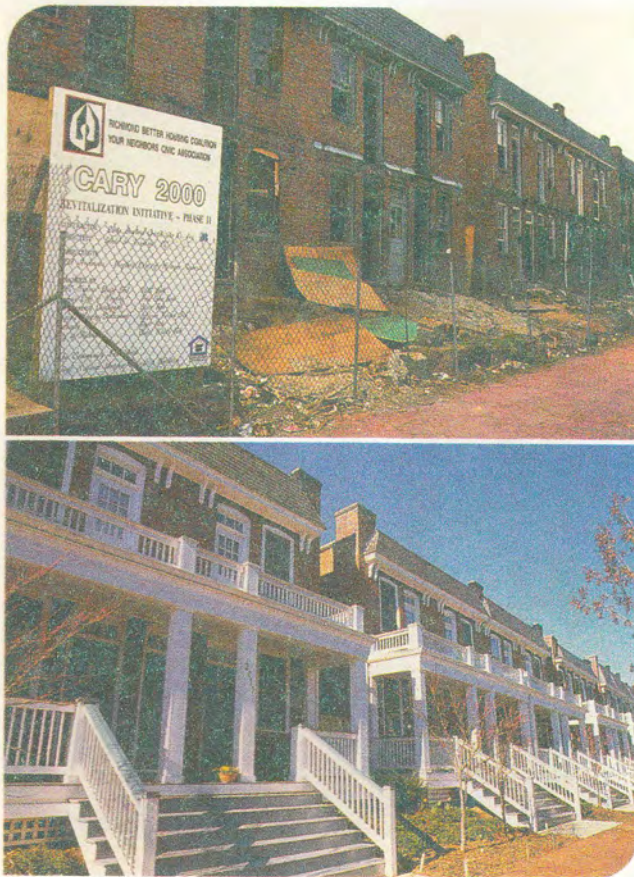
**Four redesigned public housing projects show how the federal government proposes to use New Urbanist ideas to help mitigate urban renewal disasters.**



by Andrea Oppenheimer Dean

**“One of the unsuitable ideas behind projects is the very notion that they *are* projects, abstracted out of the ordinary city and set apart. To think of salvaging or improving projects, *as projects*, is to repeat this root mistake. The aim should be to get that project, that patch upon the city, reweven back into the fabric—and in the process of doing so, strengthen the surrounding fabric too.”**

—JANE JACOBS, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, 1961.



NEARLY 40 YEARS LATER we are finally taking Jane Jacobs' advice. The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, which tore down slum neighborhoods to make way for high-rise projects during the 1960s and '70s, is now razing some of the worst projects to make way for old-fashioned neighborhoods, designed according to neotraditional planning principles. Henry Cisneros, the HUD secretary from January 1993 until January 1997 who steered his department on this new course, told me during a telephone interview that his thinking began to change when he was exposed to Marc Weiss, a former Columbia University urban planning professor. Weiss is an aficionado of the New Urbanism, the planning and architecture movement

that is shaping the design of compact new towns and the revitalization of urban neighborhoods using age-old principles of village design.

"Marc had been the embodiment of urban and housing policy in the 1992 Clinton campaign," explained Cisneros, himself a former planner. "Therefore, he would be one of the first people I brought into HUD as part of a brain trust." It was Weiss, Cisneros recalled, who persuaded him to read New Urbanist literature, visit the New Urbanist town of Kentlands in the Maryland suburbs of Washington, D.C., and embrace the New Urbanism in his quest to revitalize inner cities and build low-income housing. It was also Weiss, according to Cisneros, who originated the ideas for HUD's two most ambitious new ventures: homeownership zones, which are reclaiming large tracts of vacant or blighted urban land, and the HOPE VI program, which after a decades-long ban on demolition is making \$2.6 billion available to raze 100,000 dwelling units in the nation's most hopeless high-rise projects by the year 2000. Beginning with nine demonstration projects in 1993, the HOPE VI program had grown to 145 grants by 1997 when nearly half-a-million dollars was allocated to rebuild or modernize, according to New Urbanist principles, 6,284 units of public housing in 27 locations. Among them were Jasper, Ala.; Helena, Mont.; Stamford, Conn.; Portsmouth, Va.; Kansas City, Mo.; San Francisco; Cincinnati; Nashville; and Buffalo.

By the time I spoke with Cisneros early last fall, Weiss was gone from HUD. Rumor had it that once Andrew

yes, we strongly support this approach because we've seen that it works."

WE WON'T KNOW FOR A WHILE whether *The New York Times'* architecture critic Herbert Muschamp was accurate when he claimed in a column last June that the Congress for the New Urbanism "is the most important phenomenon to emerge in American architecture in the post-Cold War era." Until recently New Urbanism was strictly suburban, aimed at fighting sprawl by reviving the compact pre-World War II neighborhood where shopping, schools, and transportation were within walking distance. But New Urbanist ideas also offer a more astute way to revitalize inner-city neighborhoods and rebuild urban low-income housing, insist adherents such

as Weiss. Consider the typical public housing "tower in the park." Based on ideas put forth in the 1920s by the French-Swiss architect Le Corbusier, the concept began with a laudable attempt to replace airless slums with well-ventilated, sunny apartments surrounded by green spaces. But the green spaces soon turned to dirt: Because they belonged to no one, no one took care of them, and because they were beyond the viewing range of most residents in high-rise apartments, they could not be supervised and became dangerous no-man's lands, claimed by drug dealers and other criminals. And because tenants left the front entries of apartment buildings unlocked to allow their children to come and go, predators also gained entry, making open stairwells and long hallways increasingly perilous.



## Ray Gindroz "We have to reeducate ourselves about how urbanism works."

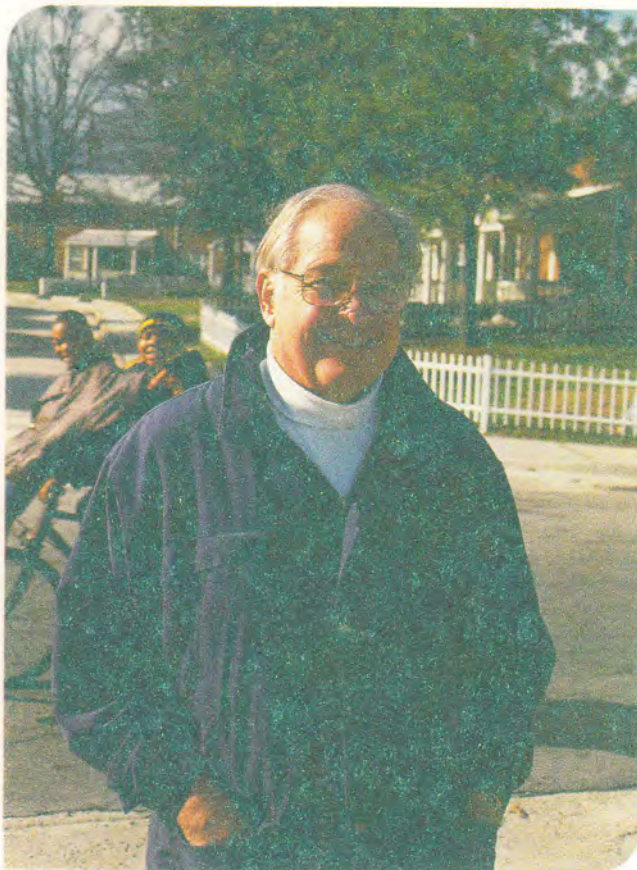
Cuomo became HUD secretary for the second Clinton administration, Weiss was perceived as too much the former secretary's man. Cisneros said that "it was natural that people should move. Marc did a magnificent job of getting the ball rolling, but the ideas are bigger than any one individual." Before saying goodbye, Cisneros told me: "This is an unprecedented moment. Both the ideas and the money are there to do something for the first time in decades." A few weeks later Secretary Cuomo gave his commitment to the new programs: "All of us at the department are committed ... to the goal of livable, mixed-use neighborhoods built to a human scale. This is consistent with the principles of the New Urbanism—and,

To make life less hazardous and shatter the isolation of housing projects, the New Urbanists propose reconnecting them to their surroundings with streets that are friendlier to walkers and replacing high-rises with lower-density row houses and mid-sized apartment houses. The idea behind their front porches, private entries, private yards, and private fences is, in part, to prevent any land from remaining unclaimed and, therefore, uncared for. Taking its cue from New Urbanist dogma that neighborhoods "be diverse in use and population," HUD is planning mixed-use and mixed-income communities for the HOPE VI program. Policymakers there are convinced, for one thing, that attracting working-class and middle-class residents

will stabilize poor neighborhoods while exposing public housing tenants to mainstream behavior and aspirations. The segregation of the poorest citizens in public housing dates only to 1969, when Congress passed a bill setting public housing rents at 25 percent of family income. The motive was generous: to guarantee shelter for the poor. But the law raised the rents of working people, unintentionally driving them out, and turned public housing over to the most impoverished.

Last summer, before Marc Weiss left HUD, I asked him about a number of common criticisms of the New Urbanism. For example, there is the charge that, like modernism, it relies too much on architecture and style to solve social and economic problems. Not according to the movement's charter, said Weiss. It states: "We recognize that physical solutions by themselves will not solve social and economic problems, but neither can economic vitality, community stability, and environmental health be sustained without a coherent and supportive physical framework." He commented, "Now obviously we don't want [the work] to look lousy, but a particular architectural sensibility and style is less important than the notion of building communities." He pointed out that HOPE VI allows up to 20 percent of funds to be spent on so-called soft costs. "It can be economic development, human services, job training, education, microenterprise opportunities, recreation, and everything you can name. It's all formulated at the local level," Weiss said. "HUD just gives out the money."

A FEW DAYS LATER, I went to Norfolk, Va., and Richmond to visit three recent



project: 428 units in 69 buildings adrift on an undifferentiated piece of mostly barren turf. The development was known for its crime and unemployment, and for its many high school dropouts and teenage pregnancies. Tenants seldom ventured outdoors, even though their units had no air conditioning.

But that was before Gindroz implemented a \$17-million exterior renovation that was completed four years ago. It was initiated by the unorthodox director of the Norfolk Redevelopment and Housing Authority, Dave Rice. Gindroz began by turning dirt paths into a system of streets and sidewalks that knit the development into the surrounding neighborhood. He rehabilitated barracks as row-house clusters with white-columned porches, small front yards bounded by low white picket fences, and back yards made secure by taller fences. Bert

Robinson, the property manager, recalled that giving each unit its own little area "gave it a completely different look, more like a neighborhood. At first the tenants didn't like it because they thought we were putting them in a cage or something, but they have come to like it. People began to put out flowers, plant more grass." Gindroz said that at least one police officer has told him that well-maintained front yards with fences and flower boxes "actually discourage the criminal element from doing business in the area, because they are a sign that this is somebody's territory."

Most of Diggs Town's front yards did look well tended, and there was plenty of outdoor activity: groups of children skipping rope and playing games, tenants and their friends whiling away a warm afternoon on their porches.

## Dave Rice of Diggs Town

The exterior renovation was at his initiation.

housing efforts, each cited by HUD as a forerunner for its HOPE VI program. The mind behind all three was that of Ray Gindroz, an architect in Pittsburgh and cochairman of the Congress for the New Urbanism's inner-city task force. Referring to Gindroz's skill at refurbishing city neighborhoods or creating them anew, Weiss had called him "the Michael Jordan of urban revitalization."

My first stop, Norfolk's Diggs Town, was the first public housing project built under the U.S. Housing Act of 1949, which for the first time set as a national objective a decent home and a suitable living environment for every American family. Until recently Diggs Town was a typical barracks-style

Follow-up studies indicate that life in Diggs Town has improved. Crime declined 30 percent from 1994 to 1996. One reason is that a police officer was assigned full-time to the community; another is "just the neighbors getting together," said Robinson. Also important is a "self-sufficiency" project undertaken in June of 1994 by the redevelopment authority together with the Norfolk Department of Social Services. By June 1996 there were 199 participants in the program. Six months later 11 had bought homes, 33 had worked themselves off welfare, 132 were employed, 39 were enrolled in an education program, and rent delinquencies had dropped from 20 percent during the program's first year to an average of 4.5 percent.

What do any of these accomplishments have to do with the redesign? "It's the starting step," said Robinson. "It gave the place a different feeling, but to keep that feeling going you have to come in with the programs. If you don't keep fighting for change, it'll go right back to where it was."

But call it what you will, Diggs Town is still a public housing project, "still too much of a concentration of low-income residents," said Gindroz. It is also isolated on Norfolk's far south side, across a bridge from the rest of the city, separated by the Elizabeth River. Rice acknowledges that public housing residents prefer to live in more convenient downtown projects.

After Gindroz and I left Diggs Town, we drove to Richmond. On the way he talked about how he began as a modern architect and was converted to New Urbanist ideas long before the movement began. "It's just the old urbanism," he said. The shift in his thinking grew out of preservation work he did during the early '70s for the historic district of York, Pa., and for Cincinnati's Over-the-Rhine neighborhood. "Analyzing traditional forms made me understand their value," he said. At the time he was also teaching urban design at Yale and conducting planning meetings in which ordinary citizens participated. He found that modernist mega-structures and related nightmares made little sense to students or prospective tenants, but they automatically understood "how to design a Main Street or fix Broadway and make it function like a Main Street in New Haven."

Gindroz became convinced that "in these traditional building types there's more than architectural form. There's a

first reeducate ourselves about how urbanism works," he said.

Randolph, the first of the Richmond neighborhoods we walked through, is a 380-acre former urban-renewal site. During the mid-1970s, the Richmond Redevelopment and Housing Administration proposed peppering the area with clusters of public housing organized around courtyards and surrounded by parking lots. The community lobbied to rebuild in the tradition of neighboring Richmond communities and to mix subsidized housing with market-rate houses. The housing authority called in Gindroz, who began, as he always does, by studying nearby neighborhoods and talking to prospective tenants. By 1978 he had developed a plan, and soon after he had created a pattern book of house types that gave builders a choice among interchangeable architectural elements—porches,

gables, dormers—to provide variety within a consistent system of materials, window types and sizes, and roof slants and heights.

What we saw while walking through Randolph was a well-cared-for, solidly middle-class neighborhood of tidy, well-designed and well-built Colonial Revival-style brick houses with bay windows and small porches. The grid of streets was separated into short blocks in the Richmond manner, lined with crape myrtle trees and well-tended gardens. The residents, I was told, are a mix of professional and working-class African American families, most of whom (646) own their houses. Sprinkled among the single-family houses and along the neighborhood's edges there are 52 rehabbed public housing units, 91 rent-subsidized apartments, and 75 public housing and 50 other housing units for



## Richmond's Randolph neighborhood

Colonial Revival-style brick houses with bay windows and porches

whole expression of culture that is coincident with how our society works." Take porches, for example. "One woman told me she liked her porch because when on it, she knew what was going on in the street, and when she was not on it, she knew there were things going on that wouldn't be if she was on her porch." He found that "if you don't follow traditional principles of public and private domain, front yard, back yard, correct design of streets to promote neighborliness and discourage through traffic, you always find trouble. The places where there's crime are where the basic principles have been violated." He disagrees with the notion that the New Urbanism eliminates room for architectural invention. "It's just we have to

elderly residents. In addition, the large, formal Petronius Jones Park, named for a 1970s neighborhood activist and boasting a swimming pool and tennis courts, buffers the community from the Downtown Expressway, rammed through Randolph in the early '70s. It cut the neighborhood in two while separating it from the rest of the city. Still, Randolph's location, a short bus ride to the downtown, is relatively convenient.

At first sales were slow, the housing authority's director, Rick Gentry, told me. Randolph had a stigma lingering from its urban renewal days. But low-interest housing loans from the Virginia Housing Development Authority melted buyer resistance, as did the local housing authority's ability to keep

the selling price low. By absorbing the cost of the land and limiting builders' profits to eight percent per house, the authority saved buyers between 25 and 30 percent on each house, according to Gentry. His agency also began to market the dwellings as a private-sector real-estate agent would, "as though the houses have no relationship to government or the housing authority." There are thus no restrictions on who can buy; residents' incomes range "up to the 80s and down into the high 20s," according to Gentry.

His deputy, Dolores Frazer, is a fairly typical resident. A former *New Yorker*, she moved to Richmond in 1990 and couldn't resist a bargain. At Randolph \$70,000 bought her a 1,400-square-foot three-bedroom, one-and-a-half bathroom house. "I couldn't find anything like it under \$80,000 in the suburbs, where I wouldn't want to live," said Frazer.

Before I left Richmond, Gindroz introduced me to T.K. Somanath, a genial and dedicated low-income housing expert who is director of the Richmond Better Housing Coalition. It is one of about 2,500 nationwide nonprofit community development corporations that have proven their inventiveness as builders of low-income housing and are being enlisted as partners in HOPE VI, other HUD programs, and state and local initiatives. Richmond's coalition has been transforming block upon boarded-up inner-city block with rehab projects and new construction that fills in empty spaces with compatible buildings. Somanath showed me his ongoing three-phase, three-block Cary 2000 effort, which has renewed 96 units of housing on the southern rim of



cessful isn't so different from making any other neighborhood work, he said. Among the requirements is to "make sure that the design complements the existing architecture."

In Richmond that means, for instance, roomy porches. Their function and value became more real for me when I climbed halfway up the stairs to where the elderly Magnolia Smith was standing on the porch of her newly renovated home in the Cary 2000 development. As I looked up at her and asked if she would answer a few questions, our respective physical positions eliminated any doubt of who was in charge. When I asked how she likes her new home, Smith answered, "I love it. Especially the porch."

LOCATED A STONE'S THROW from the John Fitzgerald Kennedy Presidential Library and the Boston campus of the University of Massachusetts, Boston's Harbor Point is the most complete and sophisticated of the models for HOPE VI. Until recently it was known as Columbia Point, New England's largest, most dangerous, and most deteriorated public housing project. Consisting of 28 flat-topped, yellow-brick buildings, three and seven stories high, it was built in the mid-1950s. By the late 1970s Columbia Point's harbor had become a dumping ground for stolen cars, and reportedly even ambulances and fire trucks wouldn't enter the project without police escort; all but 350 of the original 1,500 units had been abandoned. The people still living there blamed the Boston Housing Authority for failing to maintain the buildings, enforce its own rules, and screen new tenants.

## Dolores Frazer of Randolph **"I couldn't find anything like it under \$80,000 in the suburbs."**

Richmond's historic Fan District, a neighborhood of finely grained Victorian row houses that lies across the expressway from Randolph.

Somanath compared the work he is doing to reweaving an Oriental carpet. Above all, his work has taught him the virtues of bottom-up planning. "If you have the patience to sit down and meet people on their own turf and hear what they're saying, all the answers are right there," he said. "The usual top-down approach in this country hasn't really worked so well," he offered, politely understating the case. He stressed that "when developments don't work, it's almost always a problem of location." In fact, making a low-income neighborhood suc-

They organized themselves into a task force to take on the authority with the help of an activist whose for-profit company now provides Harbor Point's social services. In time, the task force became a partner in the \$250-million redevelopment effort led by Corcoran Mullins Jennison, a Boston developer. The company's chairman, Joe Corcoran, who grew up in nearby low-income Dorchester, chose as his architect Joan Goody, herself the product of a rough-edged Brooklyn neighborhood. Today she is a partner in a Boston firm that, like Gindroz's, has developed a specialty in low-income urban housing using the principles of old urbanism. Construction at Harbor Point began in 1986.

When Goody showed me around Harbor Point, a community of about 3,000, she explained that the tenants had wanted “a normal-looking neighborhood that didn’t look like a project, that felt safe for walking, and had a mix of incomes. They thought it took middle-class folks to get the city to send services out here.” Early in the design process Goody explored such successful Boston neighborhoods as the Back Bay and the South End and found characteristics there that have become New Urbanist gospel: open-ended gridded streets rather than culs-de-sac; curbside parking; a front door for every family and small porches, stoops, or porticos that face the street; and private back yards or shared spaces or both that provide opportunities for over-the-fence socializing.

The renewal work, Goody explained, included tearing down about two-thirds of Columbia Point’s structures and replacing them with row houses and low- and medium-sized apartment buildings. Orienting new streets to the water’s edge at a 45-degree angle allowed the reuse of 11 of the original midrise buildings; almost every resident has a view of the water. As a focus for the neighborhood the designers created a landscaped mall, modeled on Back Bay’s Commonwealth Avenue, a tree-lined boulevard edged with tall row houses. Along Harbor Point’s greensward, which leads from its gated entrance on Mount Vernon Street to the waterfront, are a meeting hall, a daycare center, management offices, a center for elderly residents, a convenience store, tennis courts, and a clubhouse with a health spa. The recreation facilities were intended as a lure for



past,” Goody remarked, “can be enriching.” Taking a lesson from the “tower in the park” concept with uncontrollable entries and corridors, she and her team made sure that only elderly residents and childless families live in the taller buildings. The exception is first-floor apartments that have their own entrances.

Porches at Harbor Point have become vestigial, mere symbols of a time before air conditioning and television. And, at least during my visit on an overcast day, few people were to be seen outdoors. At one point as we drove up and down the streets we were stopped by a police car checking on strangers, part of Harbor Point’s private security force. The neighborhood has become one of Boston’s safest, a community where floor-to-ceiling windows face the street unfortified by metal bars.

After our tour Goody, Corcoran, and Marty Jones, also of Corcoran’s company, and I sat around a table in Harbor Point’s clubhouse discussing some of the problems HUD will confront while developing its HOPE VI projects. All three voiced concerns that the New Urbanism, like modernism before it, could lose its resilience and become self-important. “There has to be recognition,” said Jones, “that, yes, design is important, the eyes on the street idea is important, the doors on the street, all that. But unless you have good management and other things to build a successful community, people will shut their doors and that will be it. A lot of desperate urban neighborhoods meet all the New Urbanist design principles.”

They also worried about HUD: Would good ideas and programs be subverted by an

## Harbor Point, before and after **“Even a dubious past can be enriching.”**

immovable bureaucracy? Is the department demolishing more buildings than necessary and renovating fewer than is desirable? A disincentive, the group agreed, is that to rehabilitate a housing project is rarely less expensive than to start anew, since most projects were built more like warehouses than houses, which makes them more inflexible and harder to adapt. The group also voiced concerns that HUD had developed a phobia about high-rises, which help provide the density needed to support the mix of uses HUD hopes to achieve.

middle-class tenants, mostly students and childless families. Of the 1,283 housing units, 70 percent are market-rate rental, and 30 percent are subsidized.

As we drove up and down Harbor Point’s streets Goody and I noted instances of poor construction and lackluster maintenance, but overall the neighborhood of gray and tan clapboard row houses and brick apartment buildings looked friendly and tidy. Goody became especially animated when talking about the old buildings that had been saved and reshaped with new pitched roofs, new entrance canopies, new bay windows, a darker brick stain, and stucco detailing. They provide a welcome visual diversity and a past. “Even a dubious

immovable bureaucracy? Is the department demolishing more buildings than necessary and renovating fewer than is desirable? A disincentive, the group agreed, is that to rehabilitate a housing project is rarely less expensive than to start anew, since most projects were built more like warehouses than houses, which makes them more inflexible and harder to adapt. The group also voiced concerns that HUD had developed a phobia about high-rises, which help provide the density needed to support the mix of uses HUD hopes to achieve.

Harbor Point, they agreed, like Randolph and Diggs Town, failed to qualify as a mixed-use community. With a population of just over 3,000, the Boston development can support one

convenience store and there are plans to open a restaurant, but that hardly constitutes a thriving variety. The problems, Goody pointed out, are similar to those faced by Main Streets nationwide. To be successful, urban retail usually needs to be sited at the confluence of two or more neighborhoods or at a location that people pass on their way to and from work. But Harbor Point is physically isolated, a thus-far insoluble problem it shares with Diggs Town and to a lesser degree with Randolph. HUD's public relations office in Washington assured me that fewer than 12 of the 145 HOPE VI projects are geographically isolated.

Harbor Point's designers, like their counterparts in Norfolk and Richmond, agreed that to persuade working-class and middle-income residents to live next to poor neighbors requires only the right inducements. Harbor Point, for instance, offers views of the water, recreational facilities, competitive rents, generous amounts of parking (by Boston standards), and a safe neighborhood. Appealing to a mixed-income population is not a problem. Attracting a racially diverse population is more difficult. The Boston development was the only one I visited that had achieved any ethnic mixing, but its subsidized tenants remained mostly African Americans.

Of course, diversity also brings problems, mainly in the form of cultural gaps that are wider between public-housing tenants and middle-class residents than between the poor and the working class, most of whom have experienced poverty. At Harbor Point there are arguments about such matters as allowed decibel levels or



## Joan Goody and Joe Corcoran **"... a normal-looking neighborhood that didn't look like a project..."**

where basketball hoops should be placed. But the advantages of a mixed community far outweigh the drawbacks. Working-class and middle-class tenants provide a stabilizing force and serve as models of mainstream behavior and values. And, as Jones pointed out, there are subtler benefits. "It's the child being able to go to school and not getting into a fight because he's known as a low-income resident for living here. It's having pride instead of embarrassment."

The most controversial aspect of the HOPE VI program is the possibility that it will reduce the number of public housing units. In nearly every case the government is demolishing more units than it is replacing and, in order to achieve

a mixed population, is allotting only about one third of the new units to public housing. Poor people who are denied replacement units will receive vouchers or certificates to supplement rents in the private housing market, where affordable units are already scarce. In last August's issue of *Architecture* magazine, senior editor Bradford McKee accused the Clinton administration and Congress of "severely cutting back the country's commitment to impoverished renters ... Since 1995, the federal housing budget has shrunk by 25 percent. Public housing alone has been cut from \$8 billion per year to \$6 billion." Without denying the gravity of the problem, Jones countered, "It's almost Reaganesque to argue that there shouldn't be any programs because everybody can't benefit from them. It's interesting

to me to see housing advocates take that position." Corcoran added that "under the best of circumstances, the HOPE VI program would probably only apply to maybe five percent of all public housing in the next 10 years. As a practical matter, there will be lots of places where folks can go who can't live in the privatized housing."

Marc Weiss, who sold Henry Cisneros on the New Urbanism and the new programs, put it to me this way. "Look, you can't accomplish every goal with everything you do. If the idea is to reduce the concentration of the poor, then obviously we're not going to rehouse all the same people on the same site. The number one priority is to build decent communities that provide affordable housing and reconnect people in public housing into the wider fabric of the

city. We want to break down the barriers."

And what of Secretary Cuomo? In a written response to questions I asked him, the former community housing developer and New York State advocate for the homeless wrote, "There is no more sure way to guarantee failure for lower-income persons than to segregate them into projects or areas labeled 'poor people only.'" He noted "we are committed to helping communities avoid mistakes of the past when they undertake HUD-funded development, to avoid creating projects that lack a sense of place, safety, and hope. ... We support design strategies, whatever their name, that foster a sense of community." It sounds encouraging. **P**